

PLANET STORIES

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER
WORLDS—THE UNIVERSE OF
FUTURE CENTURIES

FALL
20c

THRALLS OF THE ENDLESS NIGHT

1000 YEARS FORGOTTEN, TERRA'S
LOST COLONY AWAITED
A WARRIOR'S COMING

A Great Novelet

by LEIGH BRACKETT

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PLANET STORIES



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Cover design by Rozen

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Prey of the Space Falcon

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

The Administrators of the Solar System were as deadly as a Hydra-monster to those who sought freedom. Then came the Falcon and his outlaw Brood, fighting with the strangest weapon the Universe had ever seen—only to find that their existence lay in the slender hands of a girl with a Judas kiss.

Illustration By BOB LEIDENFROST



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Illustration By BOB LEIDENFROST



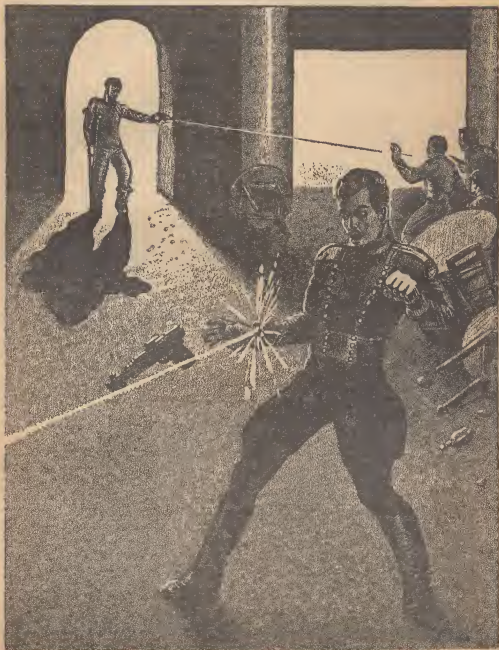
CURT VARGA watched lazily from a shadowed corner of the Martian *gailang* night club, his space-tanned left hand toying with a frosted glass of *cahnde*, and his right hand making cryptic marks with a radi-stylus upon the scrap of gold paper before him.

Music was a lilting swirl in the air, and his booted foot tapped unconsciously with the muted rhythm. He smiled at the great-chested Martians squatted about the dance floor, wondering for the hundredth time what enjoyment they received from sway-

ing to music they understood only as a series of harmonic vibrations.

Over by the circular bar, four Venusians drank stiffly and stolidly of Venusian *cahnde*, as they stood knee-deep in their water tanks. Their skins were wet and slimy, eternally soaked with the fluids flowing from the glands in their reptilian skins. They watched the good-natured crowd from beneath nictilian lids, their gazes blank and eerily aloof.

Curt Varga's throat muscles tightened as he sent his inaudible questions to his



brother in the curtained booth across the room.

"Is there any suspicion that you are working with me?" he asked. "If so, then this arrangement must be broken; I can't ruin your career, too."

The bean-sized amplifier imbedded so cunningly in the living bone at his right temple vibrated lightly from the mocking laughter.

"I think they do, Falcon," Val Varga said lightly. "But it doesn't matter; somebody has to do the undercover work—and I happen to be in a position where I can do it with the least suspicion." The voice softened. "Careers *aren't* important, anyway. I seem to remember that Dad had quite a reputation as a bio-chemist, until the Food Administrators decided his work threatened their dictatorial monopoly. And as a Commander of the IP, you were slated to go rather high."

Curt Varga grinned, and suddenly all of the deadly grimness was gone from his tanned face, and there was only the laughter in his cool grey eyes and the hint of a swashbuckling swagger to the tilt of his head to betoken the man.

"OQ!" he said inaudibly into the amplifier unit. "Now, give me a few facts."

"Well," Val's voice steadied, "the IP is still searching for the Falcon's base; they've got direct orders from Vandor to smash it within a month, Earth time. The situation is getting rather desperate; gardens have been found on half a dozen worlds, and the revenue from sale of vitamins and energy tablets has fallen alarmingly. Unless the base is found and destroyed, the IP is due for a general shake-up in command and personnel."

"Hold it!" Curt said brusquely, glanced at the Martian waiter who padded along the wall toward him.

The waiter, grotesquely-chested, round-headed, with his antennae curled on either side of his great single eye, threaded his way through the tables, stood solicitously over the Falcon's table. His right antennae uncurled, its tip lightly darting out to touch the Earthman's wrist.

"Another *cahnde*," Curt Varga said loudly. "And a *pulnik* capsule."

"Five IP agents just entered," the Martian said, the nerve impulse emanating from the antennae and travelling along

Curt's arm to his brain, where the impulse was changed into familiar English. "I think they know your *are* here."

"Thank you, Yen Dal," the Falcon said evenly. "That will do fine."

HE leaned indolently back in his chair, his clear gaze utterly guileless, a lazy hint of careless laughter lifting the corners of his mobile lips. He tightened the muscles of his belly, shifting the gun-belt a bit until the dis-gun lay flat along his thigh. He felt mocking laughter bubbling in his throat, when he saw the IP men moving inconspicuously about the night club, their keen gaze searching patiently and eagerly every shadowed corner. The Martian padded silently away.

"Things are getting hot, Val," he said into his throat mike. "Yen Dal just told me that five IP men are searching the place. Better get out of here before a fight starts."

"I heard your conversation," Val's voice grew tight and hurried. "Now listen, Curt," he finished. "As far as I have been able to learn, the headquarters of the *Smothalene* Smugglers lies somewhere in the Sargasso. An Earth renegade, Duke Ringo, is the boss. You've got to smash those smugglers, and do it quickly, for the worlds are beginning to believe that the Falcon is the man behind the *smothalene* smuggling."

Curt Varga scowled unconsciously, swirled the liquid about in the bottom of his *cahnde* glass. He felt the first pulsings of anger in his heart, and his grey eyes were no longer cool.

"I know," he answered brittlely. "Two of my ships rocketed into a trap on Jupiter's moons last week. They were carrying cargoes of oranges to the *Dahkils*, and some woman whose son had died of *smothalene* gave information to the IP."

"I hadn't heard that," Val said slowly, his voice grave.

"Now, here's the situation," the Falcon said tautly, watching the unhurried movements of an IP man walking along the long bar. "I have sold almost enough fruit and vegetables the past three months to finance buying three more Kent-Horter needle-rockets. My fleet is almost complete, lacking but a dozen or so ships that I figure will be the minimum needed to whip the IP. I won't contact you again

here, but will let you know where to meet me later. This place is getting too hot; I've got a hunch somebody tipped the fact that I use this as headquarters on Mars. Get out of here as inconspicuously as you can; then I'll make a run for it, if necessary."

"OQ, Curt!" Val's voice with subdued. "But take it easy; your job is too big to be destroyed because you insist on taking chances."

"Forget it, kid."

The Falcon finished the liquor in the first glass, sipped slowly at the fresh *cahnde* set before him by a noiseless waiter. Deep in his mind sang a tiny warning voice of danger. But he sat still, waiting for an opportunity to make a silent escape from the night club that was fast becoming an IP trap. His keen gaze flicked about the room, finding and identifying the agents scattered through the crowd.

He broke the *pulnik* capsule, rolled the fragrant tobacco in a fresh paper, lit it with his pocket lighter. He smoked slowly, the glow shadowing the flat planes of his face, lighting the rugged, almost brutal, sweep of his jaw. He edged his chair back quietly, tensing the great muscles of his legs, estimated the distance to the rear door.

Other than that, he didn't move, for he saw that he was watched by two agents converging on him from both sides of the swaying dancers on the floor. He smiled slightly, sat cool and debonair, the leather vest and silk singlet accenting the wedge of his deep chest and shoulders.

"Any minute now, Val," he said into his throat amplifier.

THE *Kaana* four-piece orchestra swung into the soft lazy melody of a century before. Glasses clinked at the bar, and the soft rustle of laughing conversation made the room seem intimate and warm. Nostalgia bit at Curt Varga's heart, when he remembered the days not so many years before when his life had been an ordered thing, when he had not been a hunted outlaw prowling the spaceways, a price on his head.

In those days, before his mind had fully matured, he had thought his life full and untrammelled. He had worn his uniform as an IP Commander with the bullying

swagger his superiors affected. With disgust and a brutal carelessness, he had enforced the commands of Jason Vandor, Dak Yar and Mezo Yong, the Food Administrators, had forced obedience from recalcitrant people of a dozen worlds, had been the leader of the shock-troops that pillaged city after city because they had incurred the anger of the Triumvirate whose hands controlled the food supplies of the Solar System.

Then in his twenty-fifth year, he had seen the foulness of the system that broke the lives and courage of the inhabited worlds. He had seen his father blasted to death for daring to raise his voice against the tyranny of the Food Administrators. He had seen his older brother die while fighting to save their father. And a conflict had raged within him for days; he had fought against the training that had been instilled within him from the day of his birth.

From musty records, he had reread the histories of the worlds, had really *understood* for the first time the true meaning of freedom. And in that hour, he had thrown aside all that had been his life, and had striven to build a new one. In a stolen Kent-Horter, he had prowled the spaceways, striking at small freighters for supplies and wealth. In the cold of space, he had stooped like the Falcon for whom he had been named, and stolen the Food Administrators' supplies time and again.

And as ever when a leader arises, other men and women came to him as filings are attracted to a lodestone. Some were renegades, the scum of the spacelanes, whose only desire was to pillage and rob those who could not fight back. But others were the peoples of a dozen worlds in whose minds flowed the desire for freedom, whose only wish was to aid in a seemingly-hopeless fight against the oppressors. And still others were the great minds of science and art and living whose lives had been stifled by rigid rules of living imposed by the Food Administrators.

Plan after plan had been made and discarded, until one was left that showed the clever brilliance of its creators. Unlimited wealth was the one thing needed for a revolution, and the plan showed clearly that way in which it could be obtained.

Because they controlled all energy-tablet

and vitamin factories, the Food Administrators held a whip hand over all the worlds. Starvation was the answer to any trouble that might arise. And should the trouble become too large to handle with the starvation threat, then the degenerate remnants of the famous Interplanetary Patrol used their weapons and brutal methods to enforce the laws.

The plan reasoned out by Curt Varga and his board of strategy had been clever enough to avoid all obstacles.

In a great asteroid, used by the Falcon for his first base, great rooms had been hollowed for gargantuan dis-guns. These rooms had been converted into living quarters for the men and women. Once established there, the men and women had worked for two years to hollow out more caverns for the growing of fruit and vegetables by hydropony. Still more rooms were manufactured for the workshops and hangars for the fitting of a huge space fleet with which the Falcon hoped to smash for all time the IP and the three men who controlled it.

And in the passing four years the gigantic task had almost reached fruition. Dead-black freighters raced the starways, carrying contraband food to all planets, there unloading, and then returning with all monies collected to buy more space equipment for the fight that was to come.

The Falcon's luck had been phenomenal; he had lost less than two percent of his men and fleet since the day his plans had been carefully organized. While IP ships had been blasted out of existence at the alarming rate of over five per cent a year.

Of course there had been trouble. There had been the internal revolution created by the rotten elements of his pirate gang. Blood had been spilled, and the war had been a deadly one that lasted for ninety days. Then the Falcon's men had conquered the others by clever maneuvering, had quashed the civil war at the cost of hundreds of lives. Telepathy and hypnotism had been used on all of the survivors, driving all thoughts of greed from their minds, fitting their mentalities for the task that was a common purpose.

And there had been the time when the IP had almost closed a trap over the Food Smugglers' leaders. Only a lucky chance had sprung the trap too soon, permitting

Curt Varga and most of his board of strategy to escape.

BUT those things lay in the past. Now a new situation had arisen that promised to be more destructive to their plans than any IP plot or internal strife.

Smothalene smugglers had begun to operate again on each planet. Once, the drug had been outlawed, all sources of the Venusian *lanka* plant, from which it was derived, had been blasted from existence. But now the drug had reappeared, was being smuggled from some secret base, and its origin could not be found.

The inhabited worlds were slowly becoming convinced that the Falcon and his men were distributing the drug; and such was the horror and agony the drug inflicted on its users, the peoples of the worlds had forgotten the good done by the Falcon's men, and were giving information to the IP as to the movements of the Food Smugglers.

It had become a war of survival for the Falcon; he had to stamp out the *smothalene* smugglers so as to protect himself, his great plan, and the lives of those who had entrusted their futures to his capable hands.

Progress had been slow, for the *smothalene* ring had been so carefully organized that only the barest of information was obtainable. But Curt Varga's organization, too, was carefully organized. His spies and agents had been working for weeks, ferreting out trivial bits of information, then relaying it back to headquarters where it was sifted and fitted with exquisite skill and patience.

For days, the Falcon had prowled the planets, contacting his agents, obtaining first-hand reports, doing two men's work himself. Now, he had the clue given him by his brother, and he felt a thrill of success touching his mind as he thought over his plans for invading the Sargasso of Space, where the drug ring's headquarters were supposed to be.

But the pressing problem of the moment was not the *smothalene* smugglers, but rather the saving of himself from the IP men who were advancing so grimly on his table.

The Falcon shifted his glance indolently about the room, giving only an uninterested cursory scrutiny to the agents,

then relaxed, his cigarette canted debonairly between his lips. He glanced about in faked surprise, when one of the agents seated himself at the table.

"What the hell do you want?" he asked pleasantly. "There are plenty of empty tables; when I want company, I'll send out invitations!"

The agent said nothing; his eyes made a quick inventory of Curt's lounging body, widening imperceptibly when they saw the casual wornness of the dis-gun's butt. He nodded at his companion, and the man ranged himself at the Falcon's left side.

Curt Varga straightened, feigning anger. "Listen," he said coldly, "I don't know you, so beat it!"

The agent at the table opened his hand; a small shield glowed dully in the palm. "What's your number, Earthman?" he asked heavily.

The Falcon shrugged, held out his wrist. The agent standing beside the table lifted a pocket fluorscope tube, trained it on the exposed wrist. The flesh seemed to dissolve, and numbers glowed bluely from the ulna bone.

"X three five one four eight L T," the agent read impersonally. He twitched off the fluorscope beam; the flesh magically came back into being. The second agent spoke the numerals and letters into a pocket vocoder.

"Hell," the Falcon said, "why didn't you tell me you were IP men? I haven't done anything wrong!"

"Who are you, and why the gun?"

Curt Varga shrugged. "I'm a scavenger, just in for a couple of days. I always carry a gun; I've got a permit from the IP here on Mars." He dry-washed his hands nervously. "Look, I don't want any trouble; I'll help any way I can, if you'll tell me what you want."

"Shut up!" the seated agent said brittlely, listened to the tinny voice coming from his vocoder. Then he pocketed the tiny unit, stood slowly. "Your numbers check," he said slowly. "But don't leave this place without my permission."

Without another word, he and his partner walked back to the bar. Curt Varga sat silently for a moment, feeling the cold sweat on his spine, breathing a bit fast. He grinned slightly, mockingly, remembering the hours of pain that had been his

when the surgeons of his hidden base had grafted the ulna of a slain Earthman into his arm after removing the natural bone. Unconsciously, his right hand lifted, and the forefinger traced the invisible scars left on his face by the surgeon whose plastic surgery had changed the shape of his features.

"I think I passed all right, Val," he said into the microphone imbedded in the cartilage of his throat. "Take it easy."

"OQ, Curt," Val answered. "I'm about to get the once over, too."

THE Falcon's fingers dipped into his pocket, found a bill. He laid it on the table, came lithely to his feet. He stood there for silent seconds, watching the crowd that swayed to the music.

Then he walked toward the bar; and there was in the unconscious swagger of his stride a love of life and laughter, a hint of the adventurer's blood that made his home the great sweeps of starway that stretched to the far horizons of the universe.

He skirted the swaying dancers on the dance floor, thrust out a steadying hand to the weaving figure of a Martian *boiloong* who had evidently been inhaling *gailang* gas for too long a period in the rooms below. The *boiloong* embraced him drunkenly with a couple of tentacles, then staggered benignly away, hiccupping loudly from two of his three mouths.

"*Cahnde*," Curt said to the bartender. The music piled in tiny swirls of melody in the air, and he absently hummed several notes of it. He accepted the frosted glass from the bartender, turned, braced his elbows on the bar. He stood silently, his nerves like taut wire.

He watched the crowd, permitting his eyes to lift to the alcove in which his brother sat. He felt a surge of affection for the man who dared to fight at his side for a principle he did not clearly understand. They met but once or twice a year, and then surreptitiously, for Val was on the chemi-staff of the Food Administrators' greatest vitamin plant. They knew they played a deadly game, in which the probable reward was death; but such was the mettle of the brothers, they gave no heed.

An IP agent jerked the curtain aside on the booth, spoke to the seated man. The Falcon could barely make out the words,

the speech coming through the amplifier grafted into Val's throat, as they were grafted into all key man of the Falcon's brood.

"Declare yourself," the agent snapped.

"Jak Denton, five four three M R S two nine, on special furlough from the chemist-staff at Luhr." Val Varga's voice was submissive, resigned, as befitted those who knew the power of the IP.

Tiny sparks of anger flared in the depths of the Falcon's grey eyes, and the muscles swelled across his wide back. But he made no outward move. "It checks," he heard the agent declare a moment later, and then the agent stepped from the booth.

The Falcon smiled slightly, drank slowly from his glass. Then his fingers tightened spasmodically, and he felt shock traveling over his lithe body in a nerve-tightening shroud.

"Get out of here, Val," he snapped earnestly into his throat-mike. "The show-down is coming."

TIME was frozen for the moment. The music dwindled to flat discords, and the dancers were only a blur at the edge of his line of sight. The Falcon straightened, set the glass on the bar without turning around, and braced his wide-spread booted feet. He felt a surge of fear in his heart, and the muscles of his gun hand were tight and strained. He knew then that the trap was sprung; it was too late to run.

Yen Dal, the Martian waiter, was on his knees, his mouth gaping in soundless agony, held there by a numbing paralysis beam in the hands of the IP man who had questioned Curt. His single eye rolled in the ecstasy of pain, and his antennae twisted and writhed with an uncanny life, as the paralysis beam ripped along each nerve with exquisite agony. Then a whistle of pain came from his lung orifice, scaled until it was almost inaudible—and his body threshed in an intolerable spasm that was horrible to see.

The Falcon stepped from the bar, circled noiselessly toward the rear exit, felt panic eating at his nerves, for he knew that Yen Dal could not hold out much longer.

He stopped in the shadow of a pillar, seeing the IP agent beside the door. He

turned a bit, gasped, when he saw that the paralysis beam had been turned off, and that the Martian's antennae was wrapped tightly about the agent's wrist. Then the agent whirled, and his shrill whistle ripped the music to scattered shreds.

"Get that man!" he bellowed. "*He's the Falcon!*"

Curt Varga went whirling to one side, and the dis-gun leaped into his fingers. A needle-ray brushed at his back, and he scythed the agent down with a withering blast from the dis-gun. Smoke surged from a flaming drapery, where a ray slashed, and then the curtain flaked into nothingness.

A Venusian screamed in a high thin whistle, dropped below the surface of the water in which he stood. The music stilled in broken fragments, and women screamed their fear in panic-stricken voice. Vibrations from a hundred sets of antennae filled the air with a solid sense of knowing dread.

"Shoot that man!" the first agent screamed again, and his voice died in a choking burbling sound, as the Falcon's shot caught him squarely in the throat.

Curt fired without conscious thought, his hand following the dictates of instinctive thinking, the blazing energy of his gun's discharges hissing in a blurred stream at the agents firing from behind pillars and overturned tables.

An agent came erect, sighed deliberately, died, his head blown completely from his shoulders by a shot winging from a side booth.

"Get out of here, Curt!" Val Varga's voice rang high and exalted. "I'll keep them busy."

His gun sang again in his hand, and there was something simple and heroic about the manner in which he stood before the booth on his crippled twisted legs. He was not a cripple then, not the remnant of a man the IP had crushed and left for dead years before when he had stood fighting at his father's side. He was, instead, bright and formidable, like the licking blade of a cause that fought against superstitious greed and intolerance.

"This is my way, Falcon," he called clearly. "Don't let me down."

Curt Varga sobbed deep in his throat, seeing that last gallant stand of the man whose deformities and keen brain had made

him able to act as a spy in the Food Administrators' stronghold. He spun on his heel, smashed a Martian to one side with a sweep of his gun-hand, then rayed an agent to death with a brutal callousness utterly foreign to his nature.

He plowed through the tables, scattering them and their screaming occupants, hoping to get to his brother's side before the man was killed. He cursed in a vicious steady whisper, darted through the crowd, firing without sighting at the men behind him. He ducked instinctively, and a network of rays crossed the spot where his head had been, burning the very air, filling all the room with the stench of ozone.

And then he was at Val's side, towering over him, and their guns wove a barrage before whom Death walked with a steady implacable stride.

An IP agent screamed, pawed blindly at the shattered remains of his face, his gun singing an undirected arc of death about the room. Bodies were lanced with the ray, and the cries of the dead made a ghastly overtone to the sound of the firing.

And then Val sagged, caught through the chest with a ray bolt that held him erect for a fleeting moment. He fell, his free hand clutching Curt's arm, almost dragging him from his feet. He smiled a bit as he died, and his voice was barely audible.

"*Make it a good world, Curt,*" he said, and he was dead.

THE Falcon straightened, and there was no mercy in his eyes then; there was only a bleak grief and a hate for those whose utter blind stupidity and cruelty had brought about such a situation.

He went forward lightly, his gun blazing in his hand, his face craggy and stone-like. He never looked back at the huddle which had been his brother.

An IP man died in a blast of searing energy that sought him out behind a pillar, surging through the wood, and then withering him into a charred and blackened mass. Another agent turned to run, and the bolt of Curt's dis-gun skewered his back, pinned him to a wall for a fleeting second, then dropped him in a silent heap.

Curt whirled, darted toward the rear door. His gun menaced the entire room,

and he was a shifting fading figure as he fled from that room of death. His eyes were blurred with tears, and his throat was constricted with grief. At the door, he hesitated briefly, then surged ahead. He heard the shrill whistles of other IP men in the street before the night club, and his nerves were tense for the slightest of sounds betokening hidden watchers in the alleyway.

He slammed the door behind him, raced down the alley. He tripped, rolled like a prowling cat, came lithely to his feet again. His hand brushed at a wall to steady himself, missed its hold, and he lurched to one side.

That misstep saved his life. A blazing bolt from a dis-rifle sprayed molten rock from the alley's floor, swung, tried to catch him in its range. He fired twice, shooting instinctively, feeling a gladness in him when he heard the choking death-rattle of the man who had fired.

He twisted about a corner, ran with a desperate speed, hearing the growing sounds of pursuit behind. He knew a place of comparative safety a block away, and he plunged toward it through the moonlit night.

Feet were pounding in the street, when he came to a manhole that led into the unused conduit system of the city. He knew he was watched but he knew also that he had to make his escape as best he could. He kicked the rusted latch of the manhole cover free, lifted the lid, shoved one leg through. Sitting on the manhole rim, he lifted his other leg through the hole, then braced his hands, and lowered himself so fast he almost fell.

The single shot melted the edge of the conduit opening, flecked briefly at the side of his head, dropped him squarely into a blaze of flame that seemed to grow out of nowhere and fold him in its embrace.

II

THE Falcon landed in a sprawling heap, cramped with vertigo, his mind numb with the shock of the shot that had slapped at the side of his head. He groped blindly for support, felt the skin ripping from his hands on the rough metal of the pipe. For seconds, he fought to retain his senses, finally forced the black shadow of unconsciousness back from his mind.

His eyes focused slowly, made out the glow cast through the open manhole. Only a moment could have passed, for he still heard the excited calling of his pursuers, and felt the vibrations of men climbing the outside of the pipe.

He went at a staggering run down the pipe, guiding himself by the beam of the radi-light torch he fumbled from his belt. Echoes drummed along the metal tube from his running feet, and the dull pounding in his head raced with the sound. He whirled around a bend in the pipe, stopped, braced himself momentarily on the curved wall. Then, the ringing in his head slowing, and his mind clearing, he ran again at a faster pace.

The yells of his pursuers rocketed through the tube, slowly gaining. But a thin smile twisted the Falcon's mouth; he had a bolt-hole or two that were unknown to any but him, holes that had saved his life before.

He slipped now and then in the greasy seepage at the pipe's bottom, came again to his feet, feeling strength draining from him, realizing that the shot had almost put a partial stasis on his nervous system.

He ran slower now, utterly unable to keep up the headlong pace. His breath was hot and dry in his throat, and a heart-pain in his side cramped his belly. He staggered again and again, until at last he could move only at a fast walk.

The agents gained, crying their pack call like Martian *ganths* running a lowland creature to death in a canal bottom. Their boots slammed driving echoes from the pipe, growing louder with each passing second.

The Falcon knew that he could run no further; he leaned against the wall, checked the charge in his gun. A mirthless laugh grated in his throat, and he felt futility beating at his heart for the first time in years.

"Make it a good world, Curt!" Val had said.

Curt Varga fought then, fought the dizziness in his mind, struggled with the defeat he felt in his heart. He had a task to do; not for himself, not for his martyred brothers and father—but for a dozen worlds to whom he and his brood had become a symbol of hope in a blackened century.

HE spun about, seeking a manhole opening, saw none. He did not know where he was, for there were no identifying marks in the tube. He thought swiftly, but his thoughts seemed to move with a treacherous slowness. Then he lifted his gun, flicked it to full force, blasted a hole through the side of the conduit.

Metal flowed in a crimson stream, grew turgid, hardened with the queerness of the native iron. Great blisters reared on the Falcon's hands as he clawed his way from the tube. He fell to the ground outside, blinked, tried to find his directions by some distinctive landmark. He gasped, whirled back to the pipe.

He had come squarely into the parking plaza at the rear of the spaceport at the edge of the city. Before him, guards had whirled, were running toward him, already clawing for the guns at their waists. And even as he turned, he heard the excited cries of the agents inside the conduit pipe.

He ran at a zig-zag pace, hugging the shadow of the pipe, toward a fleet tiny cruiser rolling into its parking place. Darting across a cleared space of ground, he tugged at the inset port-handle.

The port surged open from the weight of the air-pressure inside, and the Falcon dived through, pulling the port shut again. Still in a crouch, he spun the gun in his hand, jammed it into the side of the single passenger.

"Get out of here," he snarled. "Gully-hop this ship—and do it fast."

"Listen, you—" the pilot began.

"Either you do—or I do. Now, get going." The Falcon's face was utterly bleak and cruel, his eyes blazing with the trapped lust of a cornered wolf.

Shots slammed against the impervium hull, bounced harmlessly away. The vizi-screen glowed greenly, and the reflection of the Port Authority appeared.

"Take off, and we'll ray you down."

The Falcon growled deep in his throat, slammed into the dual control seat, snapped the control-switch to his side. With a single twitch of his right hand, he sent the ship flipping skyward.

The cruiser whipped through the night, inertia momentarily pinning its passengers to their seats. A beam lanced out from the spaceport, instantly winked off.

The Falcon's hands made lightning adjustments on the board, and the ship scooted back toward the ground, fled, barely a hundred feet above the rusty sand.

The vizi-screen was dull now, reflecting the interior of the port office—and the Port Authority's voice sang through the speaker.

"Five IP ships take off. Catch that pleasure cruiser. Use tractors to bring it down; it isn't armed. Watch out for the man aboard—he's the Falcon."

"*The Falcon!*" Fear was in the voice; the words were barely breathed.

Curt Varga smiled savagely, glanced around, fully saw his companion for the first time. He felt a certain sense of amazement; but so much had happened to him in the past hour, he no longer had the capacity for complete surprise.

She was tiny, and the synthelilk dress gloved the soft curves of her body. Her nose was impudent against the red of her mouth, and fright was in her bluish-green eyes momentarily. Then she stiffened, and her eyes were hard with a calculating coldness.

"I thought kidnaping went out with the dark ages," she said quietly.

"Miss, this is *shipnapping*." Ironical humor softened the brutal harshness of Curt Varga's jaw for the moment.

And then there was no time for talk, for he was weaving the ship in a manner that only a space-master could do, flipping the cruiser about until metal sang in a dozen tones, evading the bluish rays that fingered from the ships behind.

He gained the night shadow, circled about on muffled jets, watched the IP ships flash past him in hot pursuit of their quarry. Then he sent the cruiser straight back toward the city, angling after a time toward the mountains to the north. Not a word was spoken until after he had landed the cruiser close to his own rocket hidden beneath the overhang of a rusty bluff.

"Now what?" the girl asked.

The Falcon killed the rockets, turned about on the seat, conscious for the first time that he still held his dis-gun against her side with his left hand.

He thought fast then, made plans and discarded them with a speed that raced them kaleidoscopically through his mind. He could leave the girl tied in the cruiser

—but she had seen him, could identify him to the IP men. Or he could—he shrank from the thought; he was brutal in a dispassionate way, but he was no murderer.

"Get out," he snapped.

Color surged into the girl's face, then faded, leaving the skin a sickly white. She shrank from him, pressing against the far wall.

"I read it in your eyes," she whispered. "You were thinking of *killing* me!"

The Falcon flushed angrily, more at himself than at the girl, hating himself for thinking such thoughts, hating the twisted years that had warped him to the point that he acted like the scum he had weeded from among his men.

"Get out," he said again, and his voice was softer. "I mean you no harm." He flicked a glance from the port, toward the sky where the violet beams of mass-detectors probed the sky and earth.

She slid from the seat, took the two steps to the port, opened it with a surge of lithe strength. She dropped to the ground, followed by the Falcon. There was a puzzled fear in her eyes, a fear that grew by the moment as she saw the sleek Kent-Horter quiescent on the sand.

The Falcon stepped lithely about his prisoner, whistled with a queerly distorted note, and the port came automatically open. He gestured with the gun, impatience flaming in his eyes as she hesitated.

"Walk—or be carried," he warned grimly.

THE girl scrambled into the pirate ship. Curt Varga stepped in behind her, dogged the door shut with almost casual flicks of his right hand. He urged the girl before him with the gun, waved her into a sleeping cubicle, then pulled the door shut, locked it.

Holstering the dis-gun, he raced to the pilot room, slid into the pilot's seat. He warmed the rockets with brief twitches of his fingers on the control studs, then pulled the drive switch a third of the way back.

He felt the thrust of the rockets against his body, saw the brief flicker of the girl's ship whipping past the port. Then his ship was fleeing with accelerating speed into the tenuous atmosphere.

A dis-cannon rolled the ship, almost sent it on beam's end. He straightened her,

poured the power into the Kent converters, flicked out of range with amazing ease. Air whistled through the purifying-system, and he cut the rheostat down a bit when the reading gave an Earth-norm.

Then, and only then, did he relax. He set a reading into the calculator, flicked on the robot control, and walked slowly back to the sleeping cubicle he had momentarily made into a cell.

"Come on out, now," he said, swung the door fully open.

She had been crying, and the defiant gesture with which she tried to hide that fact built a tiny warm glow in Curt Varga's heart. But he didn't permit that feeling to show; he knew he had to keep the girl more or less cowed, if he were to have no trouble with her.

"Come on," he said again. "We'll declare a truce for the time."

She stepped past him, walked toward the pilot's room. He followed, liking her unconscious swagger which matched his own. She refused to sit, and he took one empty seat, regarded her quizzically, as he rolled a *pulnik* cigarette.

"Who are you?" he said at last.

Puzzlement kindled in the girl's eyes, was as quickly erased.

"I'm Jean—Harlon," she said slowly. She gestured about the ship. "Why did you kidnap me?"

The Falcon laughed, and youth was in his face again, some of the bitter lines softening and erasing utterly away.

"It wasn't planned," he admitted. "I was being chased—I saw your ship taxiing into a parking place—and I commandeered it." He shrugged. "You just happened to be the ship's pilot."

Amusement lifted the girl's mouth for a moment, then concern deepened the blue of her eyes. She glanced at the calculator, saw that a course had been set, and a tiny muscle twitched in her throat.

"I'm going with you!" It was a statement.

Curt Varga nodded. "Sorry," he said, "but that's the way it has to be. Only two men knew my identity—and they're dead. The few IP's who saw me tonight are also dead. It's a safety measure."

Jean Harlon stiffened slightly. "I could give my word," she said slowly.

The Falcon shook his head. "Sorry,

but the stakes are too big for me to risk another's word." He nodded at the empty seat. "Sit down," he finished kindly. "In some ways, I'm not quite as bad as I am painted."

Curt Varga tensed, felt the probing finger of thought digging at his mind. He threw up a mind-shield almost casually, grinned mockingly.

"A *telepath*?" he said conversationally.

IRRITATION colored the girl's cheeks; then reluctant admiration came into her eyes. She accepted a *pulnik* capsule, deftly rolled a cigarette, before answering.

"Not many could dismiss me that easily," she asserted. "I had five years at NYU, on Earth." She accepted a light for the cigarette.

Curt Varga nodded. "Old habit," he disclaimed. "I used to play space-rocketry with the thought-men of Pluto; the guy with an unshielded mind never had a chance."

Jean Harlon's gaze was speculative. "What happened?" she said. "Or am I stepping on your toes?"

The Falcon's face was twisted then with a show of emotion that brought a glance of disbelief from the girl. And then resolve flared in the set of his shoulders, and his voice was steady.

"I was making agent-contacts. One of my men must have tipped the IP, for they came into my 'headquarters' and made a quiet search. I would have got away, but for the fact they used that diabolic paralysis beam on a friend of mine. He pointed me out." Curt shrugged. "I had to fight my way from the trap. My brother was killed. I escaped through the conduit system, came out on the space-port. You know the rest."

"Your brother was killed!" Loathing was in Jean Harlon's eyes. "And you can sit there, and talk calmly about it?"

Anger and grief unsteadied the Falcon's voice for a moment.

"What the hell should I do—beat my chest and swear vengeance! Val knew the cards were stacked against us; he knew that both of us had lived past our appointed times. He played the game as he saw it, and died with few regrets. Hell, yes, I can talk calmly; now I've got a job to do, I've got to finish the thing

for which he and hundreds of thousands of others have died!"

He turned to the space-scanner, saw that the Kent-Horter had escaped the IP ships, felt the burning of unshed tears in his eyes. He sat silently for a moment, then whipped about as the girl's words caught at his mind.

"— dreaming fools," she was saying. "What *more* could they ask than they already have. They eat, they sleep, they have amusements and medical care. Their lives are as perfect as science can make them."

"*Science!*" Curt Varga's tone flicked like a whip-lash. "You can't run people's lives as though they were bits of unfeeling machinery. Every man has the right to control his own destiny."

Anger was in Jean Harlon's face then, too. "You blind atavistic fool," she blazed, "people cannot rule themselves! Read your histories, find in them the truth about self-government. Why, until science took the reins of power, millions died in ghastly wars for fanatical leaders whose greed for world dictatorial power was an insane fixation."

The Falcon's face was like chiseled granite. He silenced the girl with a brief motion of his hand. His voice was grave with the strength of his heart-felt belief in the thing he had made his life.

"I have no desire to convert you," he said quietly. "Conversion comes to but a few. You've got to know deep in your heart that what I say is the truth. There were wars, holocausts started by the mad dictators of the Twentieth Century. But when they were over, then democracy began to win the long struggle that had always been hers. And although other wars came through the years, always life became better for all peoples. But then science became a *master* instead of a *servant*, and the few rulers of science became the rulers of the universe. That would have been all right, had the rule been a beneficent one—but it was twisted and distorted by the descendants of our hereditary Food Administrators until it throttled and murdered all initiative and ambition and free-thinking. It strangled God-given *freedom*."

Curt Varga went suddenly silent, feeling the red creeping upward from his col-

lar. He avoided the girl's eyes, crushed out the still butt of his cigarette.

"Sorry," he said. "I guess speech-making is getting to be a habit."

Jean Harlon did not move, but her eyes searched every plane of the pirate's face.

"You really *believe* that, don't you?" she said wonderingly.

"I do!" The Falcon's voice was calm. "And so do millions of others throughout the planets. And soon the day will come when all peoples shall rule themselves. I'm not the man who will bring about the change; I am but the nucleus, that about which the change is centered. When I am gone, another will take my place, and another, and another, until people shall be free, their eyes to the sun."

Jean Harlon moved slowly, breaking the Falcon's words. There was neither belief nor disbelief in her eyes; there was only the warm awareness that before her sat a man whose heart held an ideal and his mind a plan.

"You are a strange man, Falcon," she breathed. "But you're not quite the same as I had pictured you in my mind. Oddly enough, I am not afraid of you now."

CURT VARGA grinned. "That's a point in my favor, anyway, he said. "I've never kidnapped a girl before; I wasn't certain just what I'd have to do to calm you." He shrugged. "You will go through a certain amount of discomfort," he finished, "but you will be safe—and I'll notify your family of your safety."

Jean Harlon's eyes were suddenly hooded. "I have no relatives," she admitted. "So I'll just string along with you, until you realize I'm perfectly harmless and permit me to return to Earth or Mars."

"That will be—" the Falcon began, then whipped about to the port, as the ship rocked as though shaken by a gust of wind.

"What's wrong?" Jean asked anxiously, peered out, too. "Why, it's a tractor beam—coming from that bare asteroid!"

"Watch!" the Falcon said quietly.

The pale-green beam lanced like a misty cone from the rough surface of a craggy boulder that sprang upward from the asteroid like a towering skyscraper. The pocked, rubble surface of the asteroid

glittered metallicly in the faint sun-glow, great rocky spires rearing fantastically, mountainous boulders perched in reckless confusion over the pitted surface of the ground.

Weight was almost instantly doubled in the ship, as the tractor beam caught the ship in its grip. Curt adjusted the gravity shield to counteract the beam's force on himself and Jean. The rockets had stopped their steady drumming, and the Falcon explained.

"It's a variation of the standard inertia-tractor beam. Energy of flight is nullified by the inertia beam, which neutralizes all rocket power. And the tractor beam is swinging us toward the asteroid."

Jean shivered. "It happened so fast!" she said slowly.

The seconds slipped by, and there was the sensation of falling. The cruiser swung more and more toward the great boulder, descending swiftly. There was no sound, only the steady dragging of gravity on the ship from the pale beam. Absently, the Falcon cleared the board before him, cutting all switches.

And then a giant hole flowed open in the top of the huge boulder, and the pirate ship was whisked into a slanting radiolighted tunnel.

"Hollow!" Jean said. "So this is the Pirate's Base!" She frowned. "But if it is hollow, why doesn't gravitic stress rip it to pieces?"

The Falcon still peered from the port. "We use a neutron-weld invented by Schutler. Using the weld, the skin of the Base could be but a foot thick, and still would not rupture nor permit the atmosphere to leak."

"Schutler! But he was executed five years ago."

Curt Varga shook his head. "No, Schutler is still alive; his twin brother took his place before the firing squad."

Horror was in the girl's eyes. "You mean that you *forced* him to sacrifice his life?"

The Falcon's tone was grimly brooding. "A man does what he thinks is right."

"But such a thing *isn't right*," Jean Harlon said defiantly.

Curt Varga turned, his face like chiseled

granite. "Do you know why Schutler was sentenced to be executed?"

"Of course—treason."

The Falcon's grin was raw savagery.

"He invented a growth-stimulator which brought plants to full maturity in five days from seed-planting. The Food Administrators' empire might have toppled."

Jean Harlon stepped back, anger in her face. "I don't believe it," she declared. "I happen to know the true factor."

The Falcon shrugged, glanced again through the port. Slowly the anger fled Jean's face—and a brooding puzzlement remained.

The cruiser settled with a tiny jar, lurched slightly, came to rest. Metal rasped outside, and the entrance port began to open. The Falcon came from his seat, nodded toward the port.

"Was that the truth?" Jean Harlon asked.

"Of course! I have no reason for lying. Now, let's get out of here; I've a report to make."

THREE men waited outside the open port; and the first, a massive bearded giant, caught Curt in a casual hug that whitened his smeared face.

"You lucky devil!" he roared. "Been in another scrap—and got away by the skin of your teeth. Damn, but I'd like a good fight!"

The Falcon grinned, shoved his way from the giant's arms.

"Damn it, Schutler," he snapped affectionately, "you'll kill me some day with those hugs of yours!"

Schutler laughed, tugged at his beard. "Come on," he said. "I've got an experi—"

"Wait a minute, squirt," the second man said. "Now, listen, Curt, did you make the contacts you—"

The negro brushed the others impatiently aside, tugged at Curt's arm. He smiled, and his teeth were a solid bar of white across ebony.

"Come on with me, Boss," he ordered. "You've got some cleaning up to do."

"Dammit, Curt—" Schutler began petulantly.

"Curt, those reports mus—" the second man said impatiently.

The Falcon gestured wearily. "That

can wait for a time, Crandal. Right now, I need food and a bit of medical care." He grinned. "Anyway, I've a guest to show around the Base."

"A guest?" Schutler asked.

"Come out, Jean," Curt Varga called.

Jean Harlon stepped from the lock, utterly lovely and feminine. She stared with puzzled eyes at the men standing with the Falcon.

"Why do you *permit* such liberties with the men you rule?" she asked.

Schutler laughed delightedly, the sound rolling and booming. "A new convert, Curt?" he said, then laughed again, and swept the startled girl into the circle of his arms. "Welcome to the snake's den," he finished happily.

Jean gasped in amazement, fought unsuccessfully to free herself from the burly arms, then subsided in a gale of infectious laughter. The Falcon grinned, tugged her free.

"You've met Schutler," he said. "This bald-headed old space-buzzard is Crandal, better known as the Encyclopedia. And this other is Jericho Jones, my number one mate."

The wizened man bobbed his head nervously. "Glad to know you, Miss," he said. "Now, Curt, about those reports."

"Howdodo, Miss," Jericho said, smiled toothily.

Schutler shoved forward. "How was the kid brother, Curt? Is he still dishing out the—" His voice trailed away, his gaze flicking about the group. "Sorry, Curt," he finished gently. "He was a good man."

The Falcon swallowed painfully, forced a smile, wincing a bit from the hands of the men where they touched his arms.

"He made his choice," he said slowly, and the words were like an eulogy.

He shrugged. "Take Jean to the women's quarters, Schutler," he finished unemotionally. "Later, she and I will dine together." He made an almost imperceptible gesture with one hand, and the giant's eyes widened in surprise.

"Sure, Curt," Schutler agreed. "We'll walk part-way with you."

"I don't think—" Jean began, then fell silent.

The Falcon grinned. "Everything's under control," he said reassuringly. "There

are plenty of Earth women there. They'll fix you up with clothes or whatever you need."

"Thank you, Falcon," Jean said, but fear was flickering again in her blue-green eyes.

They walked down a gentle ramp, crossed on a suspended walk to a web-tier that hugged one wall of the gigantic room. Jean peered about in quiet excitement, open amazement in her face when she saw the hundreds of fighting ships cradled in rows. She watched the men that worked with a methodical thoroughness upon the gleaming hulls, fitting the coppery muzzles of space-cannon into place. Carts darted here and there on soundless wheels, carrying supplies to piles that never grew, because other men immediately and without hurry emptied the piles in steady streams into the holds of waiting ships.

Long radi-light tubes striped the ceiling three hundred feet overhead, filled the room with the clear yellow glow of Earth sunlight. There was an air of competence and efficiency about the scene that was compellingly impressive.

"A *throg!*" Jean gasped in sudden terror.

CURT glanced down at the spider man who minced daintily along on his fragile hairy legs. His double-facetted eyes glanced toward the suspension-walk, and two of his legs lifted in salute. A piercing vibrational whistle followed. Curt grinned, whistled an answer in a series of flatted notes, waved.

"That's Lilth," he explained. He's a good guy, even if he is a Ganymedian. His family starved to death because they could not mine enough *xalithium*." He gestured toward a gigantic slug inching along the floor, pulling a loaded cart. "That's a Venusian *gastod*," he finished. "He is utterly helpless and harmless. He is also the only *gastod* not in captivity. His race exuded pure vitamin K from their bodies, so the Food Administrators imprisoned the entire race. He is a pirate here and does what he can—for oddly enough he has a brain and a soul."

They had crossed the bridge and walked slowly down a lighted tunnel. The tube debouched into a great amphitheater, at the mouth of which the group halted for a

moment. Shouts, whistles, hissings came from the groups of men before them. In a gigantic pool of steaming water, Venusian reptile-men swam with loud splashing. On the field at the right of the pool, Earthmen played space-ball, their tiny hand-tractors lancing pale-green rays at a floating gravity-neutralized sphere. The beams made a network of power that spun the copper ball like an air bubble in a whirlpool.

Spider men sat side by side, curling their legs beneath their globular bodies, then flipping them out again, a few at a time. Gravely they compared the numbers flipped out, then paid their wagers from piles of money at their sides.

Cat men from the tombs of Mars played Martian chess with their traditional enemies, the big-chested Upland *boiloongs* whose tentacles were like living ropes of steel. Creatures from a dozen worlds watched or played or rested, singly and in groups, about the gargantuan room.

"They're my men," The Falcon said proudly, feelingly. "And regardless of body-form, each is a *man*. They're the Falcon's Brood."

He led the way again, returning hearty greetings in a dozen tongues, waving, laughing, answering a hundred questions. At the edge of the room, near a tunnel's mouth, he turned to the girl who was strangely silent.

"I'll meet you for dinner in an hour," he promised. "Then I'll show you through the gardens."

"Fine!" Jean smiled, turned to follow the solicitous Schutler.

Crandal watched her go. "So she is not a convert," he said. "Then why bring her along?"

"She recognized me," the Falcon said simply, nodded good-bye, followed Jericho down another tunnel to his living quarters.

He walked into the three-room apartment, strode directly to the vocoder. Flicking a switch, he spoke quietly.

"A trap on Mars was set for me; have you heard any reports?"

A voice answered with the methodical thoroughness of a trained agent. "Yen Dal died an hour ago of nerve shock caused by an IP's paralysis beam. The man who informed the IP was executed by our

Martian agent thirty minutes later. That is all."

"Good!" the Falcon said grimly, closed the switch. He turned to the silent negro. "A *cahnde*, Jericho," he finished tiredly. "Then we'll doctor me up a bit."

He sagged in a chair, utterly spent and tired, worn from the constant strain that was his life every hour of the day. He was no longer the debonair flashing Falcon; he was only a man to whom life became grimmer and more danger-filled day by day; a man whose life was in no way his own.

III

JEAN HARLON leaned back from the table, sighed blissfully.

"I never knew," she said, "that such wonderful food existed. Why, that water-melon was the most delicious thing I've eaten in my life."

Curt Varga smiled, shoved back his chair. "Let's take a quick look at the gardens before getting some sleep," he said. "I'll show you such things as the ordinary person has not seen in more than a century."

"Swell!" Jean Harlon nodded.

They walked from the dining hall, entered a side tunnel, followed a winding ramp toward the center of the asteroid. They chatted aimlessly, speaking of nothing in particular; and Curt felt a vague pleasure in him when her eyes reflected her astonishment when she found that he was educated beyond the average of most men. There was a tang to living at the moment, and his lithe body felt good and strength-filled, ready to follow any dictate of his mind.

They turned right, stepped through a side door, and Jean's tiny gasp of awe was ample reward for all that Curt had done.

The air was warm and moist, heady with the oxygen of growing plants. Great tiers of water tanks rose along the walls, their surfaces thick with the green and yellow and bright colors of fruits and vegetables growing in the vitamin-charged hydroponic baths. They seemed to grow visibly, even as the Earthpeople watched.

Pipes as thick as a man's arm, bank upon bank, were braced in rows through the center of the immense room, and thousands of clear bubbles of water clung to

them. The light of gravitic-stasis bulbs glowed deep in each bubble, and the surfaces of all were threaded with the tender shoots of growing seedling plants.

"How utterly incredibly marvelous!" Jean whispered.

The Falcon nodded proudly. "Ten thousand tons of food go out of this cavern every day, taken to the starving people of a dozen worlds. It is not a one man job; it is a tremendous task for hundreds of thousands of men and women." He pointed to the workers between the rows. "Those are the ones who are doing the job; those are my people, my friends. They and all people like them are what I fight for."

"It's gallant," Jean admitted slowly. "But it's also so incredibly foolish. A few hundred thousand, or even millions, cannot change the world we live in. It is far better to take things as they are." She shuddered involuntarily, as a snake-man glided effortlessly across the path. "After all, creatures like that shouldn't be permitted to live like Earthmen."

The Falcon shrugged, some of the good feeling going from his mind. Then he plucked a handful of rich dark grapes.

"Try these," he said. "We've still a lot of sightseeing to do."

For another hour they walked and talked, meeting the men and women with whom the Falcon worked. Nowhere was there a fawning attitude because he was the one whose word was law. There was a tangible feeling of equality among all the people, a feeling that the girl had never seen anywhere before.

She spoke but little, until she saw the great storeroom where the wealth of a hundred nations was piled in orderly stacks. She saw that the door had neither lock nor bolt, and her eyes were startled when she glanced at the tall man at her side.

"There's no need," he said, understandingly. "This is communal property. And there are no thieves in the Base. Anyway, if a thief did appear, he could not escape—an inertia-tractor beam would bring any ship back before it could get away."

Jean nodded, and they strolled toward the exit that led to their apartments. Neither spoke now; both were silent with their thoughts. A vocoder light was on at

a corner box, and the Falcon flicked the switch.

"Yes?" he said quietly.

"A report has just come in, sir," the mechanical voice said evenly. "The girl whose ship you stole is—"

The Falcon whirled, feeling the ripping of his dis-gun from his holster. He whirled in a sudden spin that almost caught Jean Harlon; and then he came to a sudden halt, the last words of the vocoder ringing in his mind.

"—Jean Vador, the daughter of Jason Vador, the Food Administrator. She was attending a dance given by—"

The Falcon moved with a desperate tigerish speed, his hand lancing out to snatch the menacing gun. Then the softened ray caught him squarely in the chest, and the world blanked out.

HE came to slowly, then with a rush of surging emotions that were like ice-water to his brain. He rolled to his feet, wobbled unsteadily for a moment, then darted down the tunnel, running toward the comptroller's office. Tunnel after tunnel passed behind him, and he could feel the ragged pounding of his heart, as he raced across the last few yards of the entrance room.

He slammed through the door of the office, felt dismay and anger fill his mind when he saw the dissd wreck of the tractor beam board. Then he knelt, helped the comptroller to a chair, where the man sagged groggily.

The man shook his head. "The girl you came with burst in, demanded to know which were the tractor controls. I wouldn't tell, but she must have known, for she rayed them, and then blanked me out."

The Falcon snarled a curse. "She's a telepath," he said. "She read your mind." He whirled to a window, peered at the rocket runway that led into the escape tube. "One ship is gone," he finished harshly. "Without a tractor to bring her back, she'll take the news straight to her father. We can't fight the IP with half-gunned ships. I'll have to run her down."

"Your ship's been refueled and is ready to go. New radi-batteries are in the tractor gear." The comptroller roused himself with an effort.

"You sure you're all right?" Curt asked anxiously.

"I'm fine."

"Then tell Schutler and Crandal where I've gone. Tell them my orders are to triple the men outfitting the ships. I'll be back as soon as I can—but no move is to be made without my okay. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The Falcon whipped about, darted from the office. He ran at top speed, fitting the dis-gun he had grabbed from a wall rack into his belt holster. He raced to the conveyor belt, slipped into a seat, flipped the control to high speed. An instant later, he was hurtling toward his cradled ship, wind sighing past his face.

"Damn all women!" he thought. "Especially this one!"

The walls whizzed by in a grey blur, and thirty seconds later the conveyor jarred to a bone-shaking stop. Curt flipped the safety belt aside, dashed for the small cruiser resting in the cradle. He impatiently brushed aside a slow-moving workman, stepped through the port. He closed the port entrance, screwed it shut with powerful heavings of his shoulders, then darted to the control cabin. Sinking into the seat, he automatically checked the controls.

"Clear ways," he snapped into the vizi-screen, waited for the "all clear" signal. A green light flashed to his right, and he closed five stud switches in close succession. The ship lurched slightly, steadied, then fled with a rush of displaced air.

The inertia gate closed behind the ship, and the entrance hole flowed open. Ahead was the empty blackness of space. The next instant, the planetoid was far behind, and speed was piling at a terrific rate. Curt was grateful then to the man who had invented the stasis force-screen, for at the initial acceleration he had achieved, he should have been dead. But with all atoms of the ship and its contents building speed at the same rate, he felt no discomfort.

He bent toward the vision-port, scanned the Void with slitted eyes. Stars gleamed with a cold brightness far away. The Sun was at his back, and far to his right whirled Earth and Mars. Venus and Mercury fled their celestial ways far below and behind him.

He swore lightly, built up power in the vision-port, sent a scanner beam whirling.

He missed the stolen ship on the first round of the beam, caught it on the second try. It was nothing but a tiny spearhead of yellow flame far ahead.

The rockets drummed with an increasing roar and muted vibration, as his fingers flicked the switches and studs before him. And despite the stasis-field, he felt the slightest sensation of travelling at an incredible rate of speed.

The freight ship was obviously moving at top speed, and was fully eighty thousand miles away. It fled in a parabola, travelling above the plane of the ecliptic, its speed now so great that it could not make a sharp turn so as to double back to Earth at Jean Vador's touch on the controls.

Curt grinned. His ship was a cruiser, built for speed, a model that could outrace the other within a few minutes. He flicked close the last switch, sank back in his seat, watching the freight ship gradually drawing closer. He lit a *pulnik* cigarette, waited, knowing there was nothing else that he could do for moments.

Then he frowned, leaned forward. His hands grew white on the control board from the stress of his emotions, and he felt dull panic striking at his heart. For the freight ship had swerved, had swung about in an abnormal way, its rocket flow spinning in a flaming arc.

CURT watched with the sickness eating at his heart, for he knew what had happened. Inexperienced as she was, Jean had permitted her ship to be caught within the conflicting tides of gravity in space, and even now was being pulled in the Sargasso of Space.

She could not escape; there was no record of anybody ever escaping the tides. Her only hope lay in Curt Varga, the tractor rays of his cruiser, and the superior power of his ship.

He watched the futile struggle of the girl to tear the freighter loose, saw the ship whip about in a series of surging dives and evolutions that finally ceased as the ship slowly but surely was dragged into the midst of the whirlpool.

And now the two ships were but a few thousands of miles apart. Already, the gravity streams were tugging at the cruiser, striving to turn its flight into a diving

plunge for the maelstrom's heart. Curt worked with a desperate calculating intensity, playing the power of the ship against the tides, as a master machinist judges the power of his tools.

He sent the cruiser to the left, flicked on the tractor ray, flashed its probing beam toward the freighter. The beam caught, whipped by, then flicked back. Curt could feel the instant tugging. He increased power, felt the shrill whine of the ray-machine building icy fingers in his brain. Then the sound was past the audible.

The tides swept over the cruiser, flipped it about like a leaf in a breeze, almost caused him to lose contact with the freighter. But the shimmering thread of the tractor's light did not break; the ships were locked together.

Curt coaxed the last bit of power from his rockets, sent his ship in a spiralling drive for free space. He smiled thinly, grimly, when the tossing of the cruiser lessened. He glanced from the vision port, wondering if they would get free.

A SMASHING blow struck the ship, drove it back, set metal to singing. Curt swore harshly. Space was filled with floating debris captured by the gravitic tides. Small chunks of meteoric rock flashed by, followed by clouds of dust as fine as gravel. The bloated, ruptured body of a space-ship rushed by in the opposite direction, hurled nowhere in its constant swinging about the area of dead space. Curt winced, when he caught the starshine on the bulgered bodies that trailed in its wake like a meteor cloud. He wondered, irrelevantly, who the men were.

And then from the darkness of space came a great sweeping clot of debris, the gutter rubbish of the space lanes. Ships that had been caught in the tides, meteors, rocks, all the flotsam that had been gathered through the ages.

But Curt had no time for that. He felt his ship winning free, sent it whipping to the left again, wondering if his rockets would burn out under the stupendous strain. And relief filled him, when he realized that he was pulling the other ship from its death-bed of gravity.

And even as he laughed, he felt all power cease in his ship.

He swore brittlely, fought with the con-

trols. All of them were dead. Panicky, he stared from the vision port, and dull wonder filled his mind.

Twin tractor-beams were lancing from the clot of space debris below the ship, each centered on a different ship. The beams were almost white in their intensity, so great was their power.

"What the hell!" Curt Varga said audibly, relaxed momentarily.

And then the cruiser was hurtling toward the clot, sucked there by the tractor beam, moved with an incredible titanic force such as was only possible from a mighty generator. Curt swerved his gaze to the freighter, saw that it, too, was trapped.

He thought then of the words that his brother had spoken to him on Mars before, of the information that had come through about the base of the drug-smuggling ring being in the Sargasso. He cursed the utter blind stupidity that had made him discount the words even as they were spoken. And then puzzlement grew within him, for it was an established fact that, once caught within the Sargasso, nothing could escape. How, then, could this be the *smothalene* smuggling headquarters; the smuggling ships could not escape the drag of the knitted gravities?

But he had no more time for thinking. The cruiser jarred squarely into the center of the clot of debris, was sucked through it. Metal jarred and strained, and a light flickered into life on the board, indicating that a plate had been sprung in number Three hold.

Curt darted for the wall closet, unzipped it, tugged at his bulger. He slid into it, closed it, left the quartzite face-plate open until the control room was actually ruptured and the need for air from the shoulder tank was necessary.

Outside, rubbish flashed by the ports in a rush of whirling objects. Except for the crash and clatter of the cruiser forcing its way through the churning maelstrom, there was no sound.

The cruiser landed with a jar that threw Curt to one side, dazing him for a moment. He braced his feet, flipped a dis-gun from the wall rack, went slowly toward the port. He heard it unscrewing before he got there, and he coggled his head plate shut, switched on the flow of oxygen. The port came open, and a radio signal buzzed within

Curt's helmet. He felt the rushing of air from the ship into the Void.

"Come on out, with your hands up," a heavy voice snapped authoritatively.

THE Falcon paused irresolutely, then shrugged, shoved the dis-gun into a pocket of his bulger. Bending a bit, he stepped from the port, was menaced instantly by five dis-guns held in the hands of bulger-suited Earthmen. The leader moved forward, disarmed Curt, stared at him through the face plate of his space-suit.

"I've been hoping we'd meet," he said in surprise. "But I never figured you'd come popping in like this!" He gestured about. "I'm Duke Ringo; these are some of my men."

Curt gazed about, recognized that he stood in the freight hold of a great liner. The metal was twisted and torn with gravitational strain, with only one wall intact. Even now, he was being herded toward that wall.

"I'm Davis, Kemp Davis," Curt said slowly. "I've been scavenging the lanes. I was trying to save that freighter, figuring salvage rates, when your ray brought me in." He affected a dead-face expression. "What are you men doing here, were you sucked in by the tides?"

Duke Ringo laughed scornfully. "To hell with that stuff, Falcon!" he said. "We know who you are; some of us have seen you. And we've got a—" He broke off, swung about to face another group clamoring into the hold. "Who is it?" he snapped.

Curt's heart missed a beat; he took an instinctive step forward, stopped before the menace of a dis-gun. He heard Ringo's voice echoing tinnily in his earphones, heard another man's answer.

"It's a *girl*, Duke."

"Who, damn it!"

Jean's voice came clear and cool. "I'm Jean Vandor, daughter of Jason Vandor. If you have charge of these men, make them take their hands from me."

The second group slowly approached the first. The girl evidently recognized Curt, for her voice held a triumphant ring. "I see you've captured him," she said. "That's good. The reward for him will make all of you men rich. He's Curt Varga, Chief

of the Food and Smothalene Pirates."

"Who'da thought it!" Duke Ringo said in mock amazement, turned away. "Come on, we'll get back to where it's comfortable."

"Nice going, Jean," Curt Varga said bitterly. "Because of your sheer stupidity, we're in a jam that made your former one look infantile. These boys are part of the *smothalene* smugglers; we haven't got a chance."

"Shut up, Varga," Duke Ringo said curtly.

Curt subsided, went slowly forward. They entered a small compression compartment, and Duke coggged a door shut. Air hissed from vents in the walls, and the pressure gradually mounted. Thirty seconds later, Duke Ringo unzipped his suit, motioned for the others to do the same. He lifted a box from one corner of the chamber, handed small filtration masks about.

"Stick these on," he said to Curt and Jean. "Otherwise you may find yourself aging pretty rapidly."

Curt fitted his mask to his nose, clamped his lips, his eyes flicking over the group of men. They were tough, as tough as any men he had ever seen in space. And he felt queasiness in his stomach when he saw the sheer cold brutality in their eyes when they looked at him. His fists tightened when he saw the manner in which they regarded Jean.

"All right, Ringo," Curt said. "Now what's the play?"

Duke Ringo turned slowly. He was fully as tall as Curt, but he was bulkier, heavier. He surveyed Curt deliberately out of expressionless eyes, then turned his gaze to Jean.

"The young lady," he said, "will be confined to a cabin for a few days. You, I think, will earn your keep by working at a drier."

A smuggler laughed openly, subsided when Curt spun toward him.

"I'm making no threats," Curt said finally. "But don't go looking for trouble. My men know where I am; they'll be looking for me. You can't afford to buck them."

Duke Ringo chuckled. "Don't be childish, Varga," he said. "Your men wouldn't have a chance in the tides; I only found out how to enter and get back, by accident.

Play nice, and you won't get hurt. Try getting tough, and—" He spread expressive hands.

Curt took a stubborn step forward. "Listen, Ringo," he said earnestly, "my work is important; I've got to get back. I'll make a deal with you."

Jean pushed forward. "I'll *double* any bribe he offers you," she told Ringo, "if you keep him a prisoner for the IP. And I'll *triple* the reward, if you get me back to Earth within the next six days."

"Tsk, ts, ts!" Duke Ringo clucked his tongue. "Maybe I'll collect a reward bigger than you think—for turning both of you in later."

"How much ransom?" the Falcon said resignedly.

Duke Ringo pondered. "Not much," he admitted. "I just want to take over your base, your ships, your food-supply." He grinned, opened and shut his hands. "It looks as if I will."

Curt leaned forward, drove his right hand with every bit of strength in his rangy body. He forgot the issues at stake, in the blind rage of the moment; he thought only of his dreams he saw shattered beneath the grinding heel of the other's desire. He slashed with a desperate fury, and skin split on the knuckles of his hand.

DUKE RINGO went sprawling backward upon the wall, a thin trickle of blood oozing from a swelling mouth. He swore nastily, came blasting forward, his right hand catching Curt high on the chest, his left darting in, smashing at Curt's jaw. Curt rolled with the punch, sagging backward, then side-stepping. He lashed with both hands, felt a blind gladness in him when his fists drew gasps of pain from the other. He waded forward, both hands pistonning, taking blows to his own face that sent curtains of red pain spinning through his brain.

And then a savage driving punch caught Duke Ringo squarely in the throat. He sagged, pawed with both hands at his battered larynx. He gasped, unable to speak, his face purpling from the effort to breathe.

Curt darted in, flicked out a hand, caught the exposed dis-gun at Ringo's belt. He flipped the gun free, whirled, menaced the

remaining men with its flaring muzzle.

"Back," he snarled, "or I'll cut you down." He nodded at Jean. "Get behind me," he finished savagely. "This is our only chance to get free." He was the Falcon then, deadly, dangerous, a light burning in his eyes.

Jean moved hesitantly toward Curt, edged around him. The smugglers said nothing, apparently waiting for the slightest opening in Curt's offensive. Duke Ringo straightened, his face puffed, air whistling into his bruised throat.

"You'll never make it," Ringo said harshly. "Put down that gun."

Curt laughed mockingly. "I'll take my chances," he said.

And went cold with horror. For Jean lunged forward, swept the gun aside, and clung panting to his arm. The next instant, Duke leaned forward, and clubbed with his knotted fist. The blow caught Curt in the temple, hurled him to one side. He tried to turn, to spin, even as he was falling, but the girl's clutch on his arm tripped him. He went to his knees, his free hand shoving at the floor.

And then two of the smugglers had dropped on him, were smashing with heavy fists. Curt drew his legs beneath him, tore his arm free, came hurtling upward. In the midst of the movement, he saw the boot lashing at his face. He sobbed deep in his throat, knowing the blow could not miss. He tensed the muscles of his neck, rolled his head. And the boot smashed just below his right ear.

He felt the coolness of the metal flooring on his face, but there was only a grey blankness before his eyes. He tried to force his body to his feet, but there was no strength in his arms.

"Take him below," he heard Duke Ringo say. "Stick him at a drier. And because he likes to play tough, we'll see just how tough he is. *Make him work without a mask.*"

The Falcon called out, but his voice was only a whisper in his mind. He felt oblivion reaching for him with talon-like fingers, felt panicky terror constricting his heart. He knew what the last order meant; and horror filled his brain. Then hands gripped his body, swung it high. He tried to fight, and the entire world collapsed in a blaze of white-hot light.

IV

THE FALCON was drunk, completely, hilariously drunk. He sang a song about a girl with golden hair who rode a moonbeam in a race, with the Venusian express, and he stopped now and then to breathe deeply, completely oblivious of the glances given him by the guards patrolling the catwalks above the manufacturing room.

He pressed the slender shoots of *lanka* weed into the cutters, drunkenly raked the chopped remnants into a basket. Lurching, he turned to the great kiln drier, dumped the basket load into the hopper, and closed the door. He adjusted the rheostat until a needle backed another on a dial, then went back to the cutter. He leaned against the machine, idly scratched the back of his neck with one hand, gazed blearily about the room.

Then he slipped several vitamin and energy capsules from his pocket and swallowed them. He felt their quick power sealing through his body, felt the cloudy numbness lifting from his brain. He fought with a desperate effort to think clearly and concisely, for he knew that another few weeks in the *smothalene* factory would kill him.

He waited patiently, felt strength coming back to his mind. Men watched him with a blind calm curiosity, their faces, behind their filtration masks, indicating their wonder that he should still be as well as he was after several days in the polluted air of the factory.

Duke Ringo had kept his threat; the Falcon had been compelled to work at the *lanka* weed cutter without a mask. And those seven work periods had taken their toll of his rugged lithe strength. He was lucky that the machine filters permitted only the barest trace of the powder to get into the air, for a breath of the pure drug would kill him instantly, knotting his body with muscle-ripping cramps.

The drug, *smothalene*, was the deadliest aphrodisiac discovered in more than a century. Its action was swift and diabolic, raising the rate of metabolism to an incredible height, literally burning the flesh from the body of the users. Such was its action, the user consumed fifty times

his normal usage of oxygen, and consequently went on an oxygen-drunk that was more satisfying, more habit-forming, than any drug that could be found. Its final effect came in a spasmodic, hideous moment, when the cumulative effects of the drug literally exploded in a surge of unleashed power. Every bit of energy and life was sucked from the body, and the corpse became nothing but a desiccated mummy.

The Falcon thought of that and many things, remembering the brushes his men had had with the smugglers, recalling the bodies of the *smothalene* users he had seen. And he remembered, too, the accusations hurled at him and his brood, wild accusations that placed him and his men in the roles of mass murderers—as the *smothalene* smugglers.

He gripped the machine edge tightly with whitening hands. He could feel the life being burned from his body from the tiny bit of the drug his body had assimilated, sensed the coolness coming to his heated muscles as the energy tablets fed the speeded metabolism. He knew instinctively that he had not grown so accustomed to the drug that he could not break its lecherous hold. All that he needed was a greatly supplemented diet for the next few days, and then, except for the natural deterioration of his body during the *smothalene* binge, he would be as perfectly conditioned as before.

A guard leaned over the edge of the catwalk, gestured with a paralysis gun. "Snap into it, Varga," he roared. "Your period isn't up yet."

The Falcon nodded, lifted new weeds into the hopper. Benton, the Earthman working at his side, flicked his gaze warily at the guards, and his voice was a quiet whisper.

"Don't be a sap, Falcon," he said, "Walk into a paralysis ray, get it over with in a hurry."

Curt Varga shook his head. "Sorry," he said softly, "I've got other plans."

Benton smiled derisively. "Yeah? Well, a couple of others thought they had, too. They got a converter burial in the energy room."

The Falcon swayed a bit, felt drunkenness creeping into his mind again. He

found and swallowed the last of his energy tablets.

"Look," he said, "I need the help of everybody in here. I've got a plan that might work—but this *smothalene* is burning me so I can't really think. Collect all the energy tablets the men can spare for me; I'll use them to stay sober until I bust the place wide open."

Benton shook his head.

The Falcon raked weeds into the cutter, glanced about.

"The guards think I'm drunk all of the time," he whispered. "They don't worry about me any more; I can do damned near as I please. Get me those energy tablets, so my mind won't blank out at the last moment, and I'll guarantee freedom for all of us."

The Earthman considered gravely for a moment, then nodded doubtfully. "I'll do what I can, Falcon, only because of your reputaion. If your idea doesn't work, there's little lost, anyway."

Slowly, he turned, caught up a great oil-can, drifted among the machines. He talked quietly with worker after worker, finally returned and handed Varga a double handful of tablets.

"That's all I could get," he said. "Now what happens?"

"Watch for your cue." The Falcon dropped the tablets into his pocket, retaining about a dozen. He swallowed them, felt their cool rush of energy almost immediately. He unscrewed a vial from beneath a jet.

Then he proceeded to get very drunk.

HIS face went slack, his muscles rubbery. He sang in a cracked tenor, weaved carelessly through the machines, going toward the steps that led to the catwalk. He staggered drunkenly, almost belligerently righted himself again and again.

"Get back to work, Falcon," a guard called, grinned at the slackness of the pirate's once-erect body.

"I don' wanna work!" Curt Varga said nastily. "I'm gonna be sick."

"All right!" The guard jerked his head toward the rest-room. "Be sick, and then get back to your job." He grinned, as

the Falcon came laboriously up the stairs.

The Falcon staggered drunkenly toward the rest-room, shoved through the door, dropped his pretense the moment he was alone. He went swiftly toward the air-intake grill, worked at its fastenings with a screwdriver secreted in his boot-top. And as he worked, he thought.

"Jean," he thought, and his face went white from concentration. "*Jean, this is the Falcon. Listen to me. In a few minutes, I'm going to release smothalene into the air-system. Put on your mask, and be ready to run for it.*"

He sent the message again and again, wishing that he had had the telepathic training to receive as well as send. He had no way of knowing if the girl could get his message; he had no way of knowing whether or not she would tell Duke Ringo of his plans.

The grill plate came loose in his hands, and he lifted the vial of *smothalene* powder into the hole revealed. For a second, his hand remained there, and then he felt the sickness of futility come over him. He had no mask.

He stepped back from the wall, pocketed the vial, went toward the door. He hesitated for a moment, then pulled the door ajar, beckoned drunkenly to the nearest guard.

"Cummere," he said melodramatically. "I got somethin' to show you."

"What's the matter?" the guard asked suspiciously, and his gun was bright in his hand.

"Thieves, that's what it is," the Falcon asserted solemnly. "Cummon, I'll show you."

He opened the door wide, turned his back, walked toward the gaping grill-hole. The guard entered suspiciously.

"All right," the guard said. "What's up?"

"See!" the Falcon said, pointed.

The guard gaped. "Who in hell did that?" he swore angrily. "Now I've gotta —" He swung about, momentarily forgetting the man with him.

The Falcon swung with a delicate precision, striking with the death-blow of a trained IP agent. The guard was dead before his sagging body was caught in the

pirate's strong arms. He never moved.

The Falcon laid the body gently on the floor, removed the filtration mask, fitted it to his face. He pulled the coat from the slack arms and shoulders, carried it with him to the wall. Carefully, he emptied his vial of the *smothalene* crystals into the air-tube, covered the hole with the muffling coat. He stood that way for several minutes, until he was certain that the dust had been carefully sucked along the pipe. Then he darted back to the guard, took his gun, and stepped to the door.

He shot the approaching guard squarely through the throat, the gun singing its piercing note of death, the instant cry of the guard disappearing with his throat. Then the Falcon hurdled the body, raced along the catwalk.

"Benton," he yelled, "*this is it.*"

A guard shouted in brief anger, his ray searing a burning streak of agony along Curt's side. Then the Falcon whirled, dropped to one knee on the metal flooring, and his gun sang a song of death that didn't cease.

Rays lanced from the patrolling guards, and their cries were startled angry sounds. One went down from the Falcon's ray; another lined his gun with a deliberate slowness.

A thrown spanner-wrench crushed in the side of his head, and Benton raced up the catwalk's steps. He waved two more wrenches at the Falcon.

"Let's go, Varga," he shouted.

The Falcon rayed the last two guards to death with a single sweeping shot that cut them down as though before a scythe. Then he was running toward the exit.

"Stay here and organize the men," he yelled back. "Follow as quickly as possible, and mop up the smugglers still alive."

THEN he had plunged through the door and was racing down the corridor. He gagged in sheer horror when he saw the bodies of the smugglers in the hall and adjacent rooms. They were sere and brown, withered mummies dressed in clothes sizes too large. Some still twitched feebly in their last throes. *Smothalene* had dropped them with their first deep breaths of the virulent drug.

He raced on, his feet pounding deafen-

ing echoes from the floor, his gun gripped tightly in his hand. He prayed silently as he ran. And then he was at the control cabin, skidding to a stop, his gun swiveling to menace the room. It was empty, except for the sere mummy of a man at the astrogation table.

"Damn!" the Falcon swore, swerved about as a footstep sounded at the door. Then he was holding Jean in his arms, soothing the shaking of her slender shoulders.

"Ringo escaped!" the girl cried. "He was making me broadcast a ransom demand to my father, when I got your message. I grabbed a mask, and ran. He must have suspected something, for he didn't chase me. I hid, and watched him running toward the escape hatch. He was wearing a bulger." She glanced at the mummified man at the table, shuddered, tears flooding her eyes.

The Falcon shoved her aside, sprang to the control board. He flicked a switch, grinned tautly when a needle leaped to instant life. He sat in the seat, laid his gun aside. Flicking on the vizi-beam, he sent its scanner ray swirling about outside the dead ship. Almost instantly he found the tiny cruiser boring toward the outside of the clot of space debris.

His hands darted to two levers on the board, drew them back. Tractor rays leaped into sudden life, spun in pursuit of the fleeing cruiser. Secondary rays fended off the rubbish that tended to be sucked into the tractor beams.

Then the tractors caught the cruiser, caught and held it immovable. It swung about, almost stopping its direct flight. It bucked and plunged like a fish on a line, rockets flaring with incredible power to break the hold. But Curt's hands never gave it a chance. The rays grew whiter by the second, became almost invisible in their power. And the cruiser wheeled over, began sinking slowly toward the headquarter's ship.

The vizi-screen grew silvery, then green, and a face appeared on its surface.

"Clever, weren't you, Falcon," Duke Ringo said viciously. "I should have killed you when I had the chance." His eyes were mad pits of reddish hell. "I knew something was wrong when the girl made a dash from me with a mask, but I didn't

have time to warn the men, for I wasn't certain what was happening. Then the *smothalene* dropped my mate, and I barely got into a bulger before I had to take a breath. I had to run for it; I couldn't have fought your entire crowd."

The Falcon's face was stony and bleak, his eyes impersonal.

"I'm bringing you back, Ringo, and turning you in."

"To hell with you, Falcon," Duke Ringo snarled. "When I go out, you go, too." He laughed. "*All right, I'm coming in!*"

The vizi-screen went momentarily black, then the scanner ray cut back in. Duke Ringo's ship had ceased its futile efforts to escape; now it was turning, the needle prow centered directly on the smuggling headquarters. In that one flashing second, the Falcon felt a surge of admiration for the brutal bravery of the man.

But there was no time for thinking; there were only a few seconds in which to act with an instinctive blinding speed. Duke Ringo's ship was smashing downward now, driving at full-speed throttle, speeding with the combined power of the tractor rays and the surging drone of its rockets. It flashed with a speed that increased by the second, became a diving bullet that could not miss its mark.

Curt Varga cursed deep in his throat, switched off the tractor beams, watched the ship smashing in. He cringed from the explosion he knew was coming, felt terror deep in his mind. Then sanity reasserted itself, and his hands moved with a flowing speed.

He flicked on the tractor rays again, sent them spiralling to one side. They touched a fifty-foot meteor, caught it, spun it into the path of the hurtling death-ship.

Duke Ringo tried to swerve the cruiser, failed, for the ship and meteor struck in a titanic slanting blow. White heat flared for a soundless moment, force waves pushing outward in the burst of energy. Then the ship and meteor were one, and in their place was only a fused lump of metallic refuse that spun endlessly in the Sargasso of Space.

The Falcon cut all switches, turned slowly about on his seat. He stared at Benton and the other prisoners who had crowded into the room. He felt the nearness of the girl at his side, cursed

himself for becoming a sentimental fool.

"The show's over," he said quietly. "Ringo's dead."

V

FOURTEEN hours later, the Falcon stood before the control board of his sleek pirate cruiser. Jean was at his side, and they faced the vizi-screen. Except for a certain amount of lethargy because of the tiny amount of drug he had inhaled in the *smothalene* factory, the Falcon felt all right again. He was dressed in fresh clothes, a new gun was buckled at his waist. And through the blackness of his hair were threaded bits of silver the past few days had brought. Jean was dressed becomingly in some of the Falcon's spare clothes, appearing much like a rather pretty boy playing in his father's garments.

"Benton and the others," the Falcon said, "have their orders and directions for finding the Base. Those of you who did not care to join me may go where your fancies dictate. Now, don't forget. To free yourself of the Sargasso, you merely have to hold your ships to the debris clot with a tractor, and race at full throttle in as large a circle as you can. When maximum speed is reached, cut the tractor, and centrifugal force will throw you free. Has everybody got that?"

Acknowledgments came piling in from the thirty ships gathered about the Falcon's ship.

"Then let's go," the Falcon said, and sat at the controls. He flipped switches, built up speed, finally cut loose, and the Sargasso fled back behind them.

The Falcon set the robot-control, sighed relievedly. He grinned at the girl beside him, liked what he saw in her eyes.

"I'm doing this against my better judgment, Jean," he said half-mockingly, half-seriously, "but since you've given me your solemn oath, I'm willing to take a chance. Anyway, you owe me your life; for that, you should be willing to keep the Base's location a secret."

Jean Vandor nodded. "I shall keep my word," she said slowly, then she sank into a seat, caught at the Falcon's arm. "Please, Curt," she finished swiftly, "please forget this mad plan of yours! I don't say you're right or wrong, I just say that the odds are

too great for you to win. Come with me to Earth; my father will see that you are given a good job where you can be wealthy and respected. I promise you that."

The Falcon fashioned two *pulnik* cigarettes, handed one to the girl. He shook his head slightly, wryly.

"Sorry," he said, "but I couldn't, even if I wanted to. I owe too much to the people who trust me. And I have a certain sense of integrity that wouldn't let me sleep nights, should I quit now." He smiled with the quickening exuberance of a man ten years younger. "Put in a good word for me, though; I'll maybe need it, if things go wrong."

Jean Vandor smoked her cigarette silently. "They will go wrong," she said finally.

"It's a chance worth taking." The Falcon shrugged. "But tell me of Ringo's ransom demands; this is the first real chance we've had to talk, what with wrecking the smuggling headquarters, plundering the dead ships of the Sargasso, and then making our escape." He grinned. "I thank you for that, anyway; if you hadn't heard Ringo telling his men how to escape the gravitic tides, we'd be there, yet."

Jean nodded. "I heard him give the order when a new recruit was about to take a ship out. As for the ransom demand; well, Ringo demanded immunity from the Administrators, and a license to sell *smothalene* throughout the system, in return for my release. But as he told me, he planned to keep me prisoner until all the drug now manufactured was sold. With myself as a hostage, my father would be helpless to fight back."

The Falcon turned to the control board, made minute adjustments, tried to force a casual tone. He could feel the flush stealing upward from his open collar.

"What do you plan to do, once back on Earth?"

"Nothing, I suppose, just the things I did before—well, this entire affair happened."

"Are you—" The Falcon came to his feet, walked to the door. "Nothing," he finished. "I think I'll get a bit of sleep before we land."

Not waiting for a reply, he walked down the corridor. He hated himself at the

moment, hated himself and the life he lead. In his mind grew the first nucleus of a doubt that he might be wrong. In all probability, what he should do, what was the logical thing to do, was to accept Jean's offer, forget his past, and try to settle back into the ordered routine of life the Administrator's plans had mapped for twenty billion people.

Entering his cabin, he threw himself on the bunk, smoked interminable cigarettes. And as the hours passed, coherence came to his thoughts, and the bitterness faded. After a time, he slept.

HE woke only when the light tap came on his cabin door.

"We're landing, Falcon," Jean said breathlessly. "I talked with father, and he has promised a truce for the period you are on Earth."

"I'll be right out," Curt Varga said, felt the vague prickle of a premonitory thrill along his spine. Then he shrugged, climbed from the bunk, did quick ablutions. Five minutes later, his hand was on the controls when the cruiser glided to a landing at the spaceport.

Jason Vandor waited on the field, his purple robe bright in the midst of his personal bodyguard. He caught Jean in his arms, and the Falcon felt a certain sense of gladness when he saw the open affection of the man toward his daughter. Despite his faults, the man was truly a father.

"So you're the Falcon," Vandor said at last, staring at the pirate from eyes as blue and chill as ice.

Curt Vargo grinned "I'm the Falcon," he said calmly. "But I never thought to meet you under these circumstances."

"Nor I. But I do offer you thanks, anyway."

"You owe me nothing; I am here under truce. When I leave, our battle starts again."

Vandor smiled. "But you see, Falcon, that is where you are wrong. I thank you for bringing my daughter back, yes; but I also thank you for saving my men the trouble of running you down." His hand made a sharp imperative gesture. "*Blank him out,*" he ordered.

There was no time to move, no time to think; there was only the split second of consciousness when he saw the smile of

triumph on Vandro's face, and its mocking echo on the girl's. Then the dis-gun blast caught the Falcon squarely in its glow, sucked away all thought and dropped him into a blackened abyss that had no bottom.

THE Falcon moved groggily, felt nausea cramping at his belly. He groaned, shook his head, forced himself erect. Chains clanked loudly, and he felt the coolness of their metal on his arms and legs.

"Hell!" he said feelingly, felt despair eating at his heart.

Jason Vandro moved slightly, sighed, then stood from where he sat across the cell. His grey hair was almost white in the gloom, and his face was hard and merciless.

"I want to talk to you, Falcon," he said harshly.

Curt Varga blinked away his dizziness, searched the cell with his eyes. Except for two bunks, it was empty. The chains he wore were welded to the bunk upon which he sat.

"Go ahead," he said finally. "You seem to have the whip hand."

"It's about Jean." There was a tiny thread of fear running through the dictator's voice.

"All right, what about her?"

"I want you to do something. She and I just had a terrible fight, the first I can remember having with her since she was a child. She seems to think that I was wrong in capturing you while I had a chance. Now, I know such a request is strange, I know you hate me, but I want you to talk with her, and convince her that I was in the right. You know our fight is to the death; you know that neither of us asks quarter; you know you would have done the same thing had you been in my place. I'm not asking this for myself; I'm asking for her peace of mind. Her life will be wrecked, if she hates me as long as she lives."

The Falcon laughed, and the sound was ugly and ironic in the semi-darkness. He had met strange situations in his years as a freebooter of space, but none of them had been as fantastic as this.

"You honestly mean that you want me, the man you intend to execute, to intercede for you with your daughter?"

Panic tightened Jason Vandro's voice. "I'll make it worth your while, Falcon," he said. "I'll see that you are not executed; I'll see that you get life. I'll even see that you have all requests granted."

"To hell with you," the Falcon said dispassionately.

"Falcon, you've got to listen to me, you've got to. Jean is a girl, she's been brought up differently than either of us. You and I know what fighting and death are; you and I have no illusions to temper our judgments—we are cold intellects. But Jean is young, she has ideals, and they must not be destroyed. You have appealed to her instincts for romance; she has colored your actions of the past few days until you seem to be what you pretend to be. Now I want you to make her understand that your real desire to crush me and the other Administrators has nothing romantic about it; you must make her realize your real purpose—that you plan to become dictator in the Administrator's place. Will you do that, Falcon?"

Curt Varga sagged back against the wall, stared blindly at the man before him. Thoughts were chaotic in his mind.

"You believe that, don't you, Vandro?" he said slowly.

"Of course, what else I can I believe? Self-government, freedom, bah! The cattle of the worlds wouldn't know what to do with either."

The Falcon shifted. "Where is Jean?" he asked.

"On her way to Mars, where I sent her." Jason Vandro's tone grew harsh and strained. "I'm making a request, Falcon," he finished, "and I can be generous in return. But make me force you to talk to her, and I can do to you just what you would do to me." He laughed without mirth. "A pitcheblend mine, wearing no protection, might be much worse than agreeing."

Curt Varga nodded. "I don't understand you, fully. You're a merciless butcher—yet you think enough of your daughter to bargain with your enemy. But I'll do what you say—for my freedom."

Jason Vandro shook his head. "Not that," he said brittlely. "I have no desire to fight you a running battle until the final showdown. You're dead, as far as your past is concerned. But you have your

choice of death; either a slow one in prison, or a hideous one in a mine. Either way, you will fight me no more."

"What would I say?"

"Practically nothing. She swore she would believe what I said, only if you told her that my statements were the truth. Tell her that over a vizi-beam, and I promise you a decent prison life."

"I've sampled your promises."

"I swear I shall not go back on my word. Jean is the only thing in life I love; I'll do anything for her." Vandro's words were bitter and brooding.

"All right." The Falcon nodded. "I'll speak your pretty little speech. Not for you; I wouldn't give you water in hell. But for Jean; who at least hates and fights cleanly and openly." He spat. "Now get me out of here before I change my mind."

Jason Vandro stepped forward, tossed a key into Varga's lap. His concealed hand came from beneath his robe, and a gun glinted dully in his fist.

"Cross me, Falcon," he said quietly, "and for every minute of mental torture you give me, I'll give you a year of the same."

The Falcon unlocked his chains, stood erect. "I'll speak your piece," he answered. "But don't make threats."

HE walked before the menace of the gun through the open door, followed the line of radi-lights down the stone corridor. He felt nothing but a dull apathy within his mind, and he cared nothing for the future. He knew there was no escape, and the knowledge left him unemotional.

But then the thought came that Jean had fought on his side, and he felt warmth spreading through his heart. There was a gulf between them, a space that would never be spanned. Yet he felt closer to the girl now than he had felt toward any person other than his brother in years.

"This way, Falcon," Jason Vandro said.

They walked a corridor, turned right, entered the vizi-beam room where operators sat before the machines that connected with all planets.

Jason Vandro stopped beside a machine. "Get the *Ardeth* on the beam," he ordered.

"Yes, your Lordship!" The beam-man's fingers made clicking contacts with the machine's controls. The vizi-screen became silvery, slowly turned green.

Life grew on the screen. Color swirled, then merged, and Jean Vandro frowned from the screen.

"Yes?" she asked.

Jason Vandro forced the Falcon to the screen with his gun. The Falcon was conscious then of the utter quiet in the room, as though all were afraid to breathe. He could feel the pounding of his heart as he stepped forward.

"Can you hear me, Jean?" he asked quietly.

"I can hear you, Curt."

The Falcon forced all feeling from his voice. "Jean, answer me truthfully; did you plot that I should be captured?"

Tears welled in the girl's eyes, and her head shook slightly.

"No, Curt."

Curt Varga sighed then, and the ache in his heart was a tangible thing that hurt with an agony he had not thought possible for a man to feel.

"Remember the things I told you, Jean? Remember the hopes and dreams and plans I had?"

"I remember."

"Then, Jean, this is the truth. Remember this all of your life; fight for it, never let it die. *Men are born to be free; no man can place himself in the role of God, there to dictate what—*"

The blow of the gun barrel smashed him to his knees. He knelt there for seconds, laughing into Jason Vandro's face.

"I'm a *small* man, Vandro," the Falcon said. "I can hate and I can love. But I am true to myself, if nothing else. Get somebody else to do your lying."

Jason Vandro's face was a chiseled mask of evil rage. He saw then the crumbling of the life he had built, saw then the truth that lay in the Falcon. He knew then that all of the treasures and powers of a hundred worlds could not replace that which he had lost in those fleeting seconds.

He lifted his gun to shoot the defenseless Falcon to death—and died that way, a dis-ray scything him down in a huddled heap.

"By damn, a fight at last!" a great voice roared from the doorway, and Schutler sprang into the room.

His laughter was mad with the richness of the moment, and the twin guns were almost buried in the greatness of his fists.

Crandal was at his side, his bald head gleaming, his gun lancing flame like a jet of glowing water. And behind both, shoving them forward, came Jericho, his ebony face agleam, a great sword in one hand, a gun in another.

"*Falcon!*" Jericho cried, and his gun made an arc through the air, was caught deftly in the Falcon's reaching hand.

THEN hell broke loose in that great room, a hell of a dozen darting crossing rays of death, a holocaust of power that surged and twisted and searched for the lives of the men within.

A guard went down, his gun still holstered, his face blown away by the left gun of the laughing giant at the door. Crandal darted sideways like a crab, gun-flame licking out, precisely, almost daintily, never wasting energy on the wall or air. And Jericho moved like a black whirlwind, countering the dis-flame of a single guard by touching it with his sword-blade, and grounding the energy in his power-glove.

And the Falcon was on his feet, his laughter ringing as in the days of old, when a fight had been the thing to set a man's blood to pounding, when to live was a zestful thing of promise, when the future was bright and the past a gay memory.

He raced to the side of his men, cutting a guard from his side, raying a second even as he was lining his gun on Jericho. The Negro grinned, and his swinging sword fled through the neck of a guard, followed about and dropped a hand from the wrist of a screaming second.

Schutler went down, his beard flaming where a bolt had grazed his chin. He roared like an angry bull, pawed at the flame and smoke of his burning beard, swept his other hand as a man sprays water. Guards dropped like flies beneath a poison spray.

A shot caught Crandal in one leg, dropped him to his knee. His face went even whiter, and sweat was on his head.

The Falcon sprang to Crandal's side, caught him up with his left arm, raised a barrage of shots with the gun in his right. His teeth were white against the tan of his face, and the cold of his grey eyes was strange against the laughter that filled his face.

And the four were together, and no man could stand against them. They were courage and brains and strength and agility, all together, yet separate in themselves. Apart, they could be downed; but together, all hell itself brought mad rich laughter to their throats, and a flame to their eyes.

They stood together, and their guns made singing sounds that were like those from a harp of death. And before those notes men sank and died, one by one, and two by two, until only living stood beside the door, and there was no other life.

"Come, man," Schutler boomed, "before others hear the fight and stick their noses in!" He fingered the stubble of his beard.

"Are you all right, Jim?" the Falcon asked Crandal, and the man grinned with a white-faced smile.

Jericho caught up the wounded man, ignoring a ray burn that raced like a livid purple snake across the blackness of his shoulders. He jerked his head at the door.

"We come in by a secret passage," he explained in a rush of words. "We didn't find you in the cells, so we come hunting."

The Falcon choked back the lump in his throat, and his eyes were misty as he looked at the men to whom loyalty was neither a word nor a gesture, only a thing that was in them when the need arose.

"How—?" he began.

"I did it, Curt," Jean's voice said.

Jean was crying then, crying like a child whose first dreams are gone, crying like one whose new dreams are but the faintest of sounds in her consciousness. Through the vizi-screen she had seen all that had happened, and the sickness in her eyes would be long leaving.

"Jean," the Falcon said. "Please, Jean—"

She was smiling then, smiling through the tears that would not stop. And the Falcon, watching her features on the screen, knew the torture that was hers.

"I'll be waiting, Curt," she said. "But hurry—Oh, please hurry!"

"Wait for me, Jean, *wait for me.*"

And the Falcon and his brood were running down the hall, running toward the secret spot where a pirate ship waited to take them back to their fight and their loves and their freedom—and to the far horizons of their starway destiny.

Message From Mars

By CLIFFORD D. SIMAK

Fifty-five pioneers had died on the "bridge of bones" that spanned the Void to the rusty plains of Mars. Now the fifty-sixth stood on the red planet, his only ship a total wreck—and knew that Earth was doomed unless he could send a warning within hours.

Illustration by Doolin

"YOU'RE CRAZY, man," snapped Steven Alexander, "you can't take off for Mars alone!"

Scott Nixon thumped the desk in sudden irritation.

"Why not?" he shouted. "One man can run a rocket. Jack Riley's sick and there are no other pilots here. The rocket blasts in fifteen minutes and we can't wait. This is the last chance. The only chance we'll have for months."

Jerry Palmer, sitting in front of the massive radio, reached for a bottle of Scotch and slopped a drink into the tumbler at his elbow.

"Hell, Doc," he said, "let him go. It won't make any difference. He won't reach Mars. He's just going out in space to die like all the rest of them."

Alexander snapped savagely at him. "You don't know what you're saying. You drink too much."

"Forget it, Doc," said Scott. "He's telling the truth. I won't get to Mars, of course. You know what they're saying down in the base camp, don't you? About the bridge of bones. Walking to Mars over a bridge of bones."

The old man stared at him. "You have lost faith? You don't think you'll go to Mars?"

Scott shook his head. "I haven't lost my faith. Someone will get there . . . sometime. But it's too soon yet. Look at that tablet, will you!"

He waved his hand at a bronze plate set into the wall.

"The roll of honor," said Scott, bitterly. "Look at the names. You'll have to buy another soon. There won't be room enough."

One Nixon already was on that scroll of bronze. Hugh Nixon, fifty-fourth from the top. And under that the name of Harry

Decker, the man who had gone out with him.

The radio blurted suddenly at them, jabbering, squealing, howling in anguish.

Scott stiffened, ears tensed as the code sputtered across millions of miles. But it was the same old routine. The same old message, repeated over and over again . . . the same old warning hurled out from the ruddy planet.

"No. No. No come. Danger."

Scott turned toward the window, started up into the sky at the crimson eye of Mars.

What was the use of keeping hope alive? Hope that Hugh might have reached Mars, that some day the Martian code would bring some word of him.

Hugh had died . . . like all the rest of them. Like those whose names were graven in the bronze there on the wall. The maw of space had swallowed him. He had flown into the face of silence and the silence was unbroken.

The door of the office creaked open, letting in a gust of chilly air. Jimmy Baldwin shut the door behind him and looked at them vacantly.

"Nice night to go to Mars," he said.

"You shouldn't be up here, Jimmy," said Alexander gently. "You should be down at the base, tending to your flowers."

"There're lots of flowers on Mars," said Jimmy. "Maybe some day I'll go to Mars and see."

"Wait until somebody else goes first," said Palmer bitterly.

Jimmy turned about, hesitantly, like a man who had a purpose but had forgotten what it was. He moved slowly toward the door and opened it.

"I got to go," he said.

The door closed heavily but the chill did not vanish from the room. For it wasn't the chill of the mountain's peak,



The spider-machines attacked in a grim deadly silence.

but another kind of chill . . . a chill that had walked in with Jimmy Baldwin and now refused to leave.

Palmer tipped the bottle, sloshed the whiskey in the glass.

"The greatest pilot that ever lived," he said. "Now look at him!"

"He still holds the record," Alexander reminded the radio operator. "Eight times to the Moon and still alive."

The accident had happened as Jimmy's ship was approaching Earth on that eighth return trip. A tiny meteor had struck the hull, drilling a sharp-cut hole. It had struck Andy Mason, Jimmy's best friend, squarely between the eyes.

The cabin had been filled with the scream of escaping air, had turned cold with the deadly breath of space and frost crystals had danced in front of Jimmy's eyes.

Somehow Jimmy had patched the hole in the hull, had reached Earth in a smashing rocket drive, knowing he had little air, that every minute was a borrowed eternity.

Most pilots would have killed themselves or blown up their ships in that reckless race for Earth, but Jimmy, ace of all the space-men of his day, had made it.

But he had walked from the ship with a blank face and babbling lips. He still lived at the rocket camp because it was home to him. He puttered among his flowers. He watched the rockets come and go without a flutter of expression. And everyone was kind to him, for in his face they read a fate that might be theirs.

"All of us are crazy," said Scott. "Everyone of us. Myself included. That's why I'm blasting off alone."

"I refuse to let you go," said Alexander firmly.

Scott rested his knuckles on the desk. "You can't stop me. I have my orders to make the trip. Whether I go alone or with an assistant pilot makes no difference. That rocket blasts on time, and I'm in it when it goes."

"But it's foolishness," protested Alexander. "You'll go space-mad. Think of the loneliness!"

"Think of the coordinates," snapped Scott. "Delay the blast-off and you have to work out a set of new ones. Days of work and then it'll be too late. Mars will be too far away."

Alexander spread his hands. "All right then. I hope you make it."

Scott turned away but Alexander called him back.

"You're sure of the routine?"

Scott nodded. He knew the routine by heart. So many hours out to the Moon, landing on the Moon to take on extra fuel, taking off for Mars at an exact angle at a certain minute.

"I'll come out and see you off," said Alexander. He heaved himself up and slid into a heavy coat.

Palmer shouted after Scott. "So long, big boy. It was nice knowing you."

Scott shrugged. Palmer was a little drunk and very bitter. He'd watched them go too long. His nerves were wearing out.

STARS shone like hard, bright jewels in the African sky. A sharp wind blew over the summit of Mt. Kenya, a wind that whined among the ice-bound rocks and bit deep into the flesh. Far below blazed the lights of the base camp, hundreds of feet down the slope from the main rocket camp here atop the mountain set squarely on the Earth's equator.

The rasping voice of a radio newscaster came from the open door of the machine shop.

"New York," shrieked the announcer. "Austin Gordon, famous African explorer, announced this afternoon he will leave soon for the Congo valley, where he will investigate reports of a strange metallic city deep in the interior. Natives, bringing reports of the discovery out of the jungle, claim the city is inhabited by strange metallic insects."

Someone slammed the door and the voice was cut off.

Scott hunched into the wind to light a cigarette.

"The explorers are going crazy, too," he said.

Probably, later on in the program the announcer would have mentioned Scott Nixon and Jack Riley would blast off in a few minutes in another attempt to reach Mars. But it would be well along in the program and it wouldn't take much time. Ten years ago Mars had been big news. Today it rated small heads in the press, slight mention on the air.

But the newscaster would have been wrong about Jack Riley. Jack Riley lay in the base camp hospital with an attack of ptomaine. Only an hour before Jack had clasped Scott's hand and grinned at him and wished him luck.

He needed luck. For in this business a man didn't have even an inside chance.

SCOTT walked toward the tilted rocket. He could hear the crunch of Alexander's feet as the man moved with him.

"It won't be new to you," Alexander was saying, "you've been to the Moon before."

Yes, he had been to the Moon three times and he was still alive. But, then, he had been lucky. Your luck just simply didn't hold forever. There was too much to gamble on in space. Fuel, for one thing. Men had experimented with fuel for ten years now and still the only thing they had was a combination of liquid oxygen and gasoline. They had tried liquid hydrogen but that had proved too cold, too difficult to confine, treacherous to handle, too bulky because of its low density. Liquid oxygen could be put under pressure, condensed into little space. It was safe to handle, safe until it combined with gasoline and then it was sheer death to anything that got within its reach.

Of course, there had been some improvements. Better handling of the fuel, for instance. Combustion chambers stood up better now because they were designed better. Feed lines didn't freeze so readily now as when the first coffins took to space. Rocket motors were more efficient, but still cranky.

But there were other things. Meteors, for one, and you couldn't do much about them. Not until someone designed a screen, and no one had. Radiations were another. Space was full of radiations and, despite the insulating jacket of ozone some of them seeped through.

Scott climbed through the rocket valve and turned to close it. He hesitated for a moment, drinking in the smell and sight of Earth. There wasn't much that one could see. The anxious face of Alexander, the huddled shadows that were watching men, the twinkling base camp lights.

With a curse at its own weakness, Scott slammed the valve lock, twirled it home.

3—Planet Stories—Fall

Fitting himself into the shock absorbent chair, he fastened the straps that held him. His right foot reached out and found the trip that would fire the rockets. Then he lifted his wrist in front of his eyes and watched the second hand of the watch.

Ten seconds. Eight. Now five. The hand was creeping up, ticking off the time. It rested on the zero mark and he slammed down his foot. Cruel weight smashed down upon him, driving his body back into the padded chair. His lungs were flattened, the air driven from them. His heart thumped. Nausea seized him, and black mists swam before his eyes. He seemed to be slipping into a midnight chasm and he cried out weakly. His body went limp, sagging in the chair. Twin streams of blood trickled from his nose and down his lip.

He was far out in space when he struggled back to consciousness. For a time he did not stir. Lying in the chair, it took long minutes to realize where he was. Gradually his brain cleared and his eyes focused and made impressions on his senses. Slowly he became aware of the lighted instrument board, of the rectangle of quartz that formed the vision panel. His ears registered the silence that steeped the ship, the weird, deadly silence of outer space.

Weakly he stirred and sat upright, his eyes automatically studying the panel. The fuel pressure was all right, atmospheric pressure was holding, speed was satisfactory.

He leaned back in the chair and waited, resting, storing his strength. Automatically his hand reached up and wiped the blood from his lips and chin.

II

HE was in space. Headed for the Moon and from there for Mars. But even the realization of this failed to rouse him from the lethargy of battered body and tortured brain.

Taking off in a rocket was punishment. Severe, terrible punishment. Only men who were perfect physical specimens could attempt it. An imperfect heart would simply stop under the jarring impact of the blast-off.

Some day rockets would be perfected. Some day rockets would rise gently from the Earth, shaking off Earth's gravity by

gradual application of power rather than by tremendous thrusts that kicked steel and glass and men out into space.

But not yet, not for many years. Perhaps not for many generations. For many years men would risk their lives in blasting projectiles that ripped loose from the Earth by the sheer savagery of exploding oxygen and gasoline.

A moan came from the rear of the ship, a stifled pitiful moan that brought Scott upright in the chair, tearing with nervous hands at the buckles of his belt.

With belt loosened, body tensed, he waited for a second, hardly believing he had heard the sound. It came again, a piteous human cry.

Scott leaped to his feet, staggered under the lack of gravitation. The rocket was coasting on momentum now and, while its forward motion gave it a simulation of gravity, enough so a man could orient himself, there was in actuality no positive gravity center in the shell.

A bundle of heavy blankets lay in a corner formed by a lashed down pile of boxes . . . and the bundle was moving feebly. With a cry in his throat, Scott leaped forward and tore the blankets aside. Under them lay a battered man, crumpled, with a pool of blood soaking into a blanket that lay beneath him. Scott lifted the body. The head flopped over and he stared down into the vacant, blood-streaked face of Jimmy Baldwin.

Jimmy's eyes fluttered open, then closed again. Scott squatted on his heels, wild thoughts hammering in his head. Jimmy's eyes opened again and regarded the pilot. He raised a feeble hand in greeting. The lips moved, but Jimmy's voice was faint.

"Hello, Scott."

"What are you doing here?" Scott demanded fiercely.

"I don't know," said Jimmy weakly. "I don't know. I meant to do something, but I forgot."

Scott rose and took a bottle of water from a case. Wetting his handkerchief, he bathed the bloodied face. His hands ran over Jimmy's body but found no broken bones. It was a wonder the man hadn't been killed outright. Some more Baldwin luck!

"Where are we, Scott?" Jimmy asked.

"We're in space," said Scott. "We're

going out to Mars." No use of telling him anything but the truth.

"Space," said Jimmy. "I use to go out in space. Then something happened." He shook his head wearily. Mercifully, the memory of that *something* had been wiped from his brain.

Half dragging, half carrying, Scott got him to the assistant pilot's seat, strapped him in, gave him a drink of water. Jimmy's eyes closed and he sank back into the cushions. Scott resumed his chair, leaned forward to look out into space.

There was little to see. Space, viewed from any angle, unless one was near a large body, looked pretty much the same. The Moon was still out of his range of vision. It would be hours before it would move upward to intersect the path of the rocket's flight.

SCOTT leaned back and looked at Jimmy. Apparently the man had sneaked aboard just before the take-off. No one paid much attention to him. Everyone was kind to him and he was allowed to do as he pleased. For he was not insane. The tragedy of those few minutes years before had merely wiped out his memory, given him the outlook of a child.

Perhaps when he had gotten into the ship he had held some reason for his action, but now even that purpose had escaped him. Once again Jimmy Baldwin was a bewildered child's brain in the body of a man.

"Anyway," said Scott, half speaking to himself, half to the silent form, "you're the first rocket stowaway."

They would miss Jimmy back at the camp, would wonder what had happened to him. Perhaps they'd organize a posse and search for him. The possibility was they would never know what happened, for there was slight chance, Scott told himself, that he or Jimmy or the ship would ever get back to Earth again.

Someone else would have to tend Jimmy's flowers now, but probably no one would, for his flowers were the Martian lilies. And Martian lilies no longer were a novelty.

It had been the lilies that started the whole thing, this crazy parade of men who went into space and died.

Slightly over twelve years ago, Dr.

Steven Alexander reported that, from his observatory on Mt. Kenya, he had communicated with Mars by ultrashort wave radio. It had been a long and arduous process. First the signals from Earth, repeated in definite series, at definite intervals. And then, finally, the answer from the Red Planet. After months of labor slow understanding came.

"We send you," signalled the Martians. "We send you." Over and over again. A meaningless phrase. What were they sending? Slowly Alexander untangled the simple skein of thought. Mars finally messaged: "*We send you token!*" That word "token" had been hard. It represented thought, an abstract thought.

The world waited breathlessly for the token. Finally it came, a rocket winging its way across space, a rocket that flashed and glinted in the depth of space as it neared Earth. Kept informed of its location by the Martians, Earth's telescopes watched it come. It landed near Mt. Kenya, a roaring, screaming streak of light that flashed across the midnight sky.

Dug up, it yielded an inner container, well-insulated against heat and cold, against radiation and shock. Opened, it was found to contain seeds. Planted, jealously guarded, carefully tended, the seeds grew, were the Martian lilies. They multiplied rapidly, spread quickly over the Earth.

Back on Earth today the Martian lilies grew in every hamlet, clogged the fence rows of every farm. Relieved of whatever natural enemies and checks they might have had on their native planet, they flourished and spread, became a weed that every farmer cursed whole-heartedly.

Their root structure probed deep into the soil. Drought could not kill them. They grew rapidly, springing to full growth almost overnight. They went to unkillable seed. Which was what might have been expected of any plant nurtured on the stubborn soil of Mars. Earth, to the Martian lilies, was a paradise of air and water and sunlight.

And, as if that first token-load had not been enough, the Martians kept on sending rocket loads of seeds. At each opposition the rockets came, each announced by the messages from the Martian transmitter. And each of them landed almost precisely on the spot where the first had landed.

That took mathematics! Mathematics and a superb knowledge of rocketry. The rockets apparently were automatic. There was no intelligence to guide them once they were shot into space. Their courses must have been plotted to the finest detail, with every factor determined in advance. For the Martian rockets were not aimed at Earth as one broad target but at a certain spot on Earth and so far every one of them had hit that mark!

At the rocket camp each Martian rocket was waited anxiously, with the hope it would bring some new pay load. But the rockets never brought anything but seeds . . . more Martian lily seeds.

JIMMY stirred restlessly, opened his eyes and looked out the vision plate. But there was no terror in his eyes, no surprise nor regret.

"Space?" he asked.

Scott nodded.

"We're going to the Moon?"

"To the Moon first," said Scott. "From there we go to Mars."

Jimmy lapsed into silence. There was no change upon his face. There never was any change upon his face.

I hope he doesn't make any trouble, Scott told himself. It was bad enough just to have him along. Bad enough to have this added responsibility.

For space flight was a dangerous job. Ever since the International Mars Communication Center had been formed, with Alexander in charge, space had flung men aside. Ship after ship, pilot after pilot. The task, alone, of reaching the Moon had taken terrible toll.

Men had died. Some had died before they reached the Moon, some had died on the Moon but mostly they had died heading back for Earth. For landing on Earth, jockeying a rocket through Earth's dense atmosphere, is a tricky job. Others had died enroute to Mars, ships flaring in space or simply disappearing, going on and on, never coming back. That was the way it had been with Hugh.

And now his brother, Scott, was following the trail that Hugh had blazed, the trail to the Moon and out beyond. Following in a bomb of potential death, with a blank-faced stowaway in the chair beside him.

HALF way to Mars and the ship was still intact. Running true to course, running on schedule, flashing through space under the thrust of momentum built up during the blast-out from the Moon.

Half way to Mars and still alive! But too early yet to hope. Perhaps other men had gotten as far as this and then something had happened.

Scott watched the depths of space, the leering, jeering emptiness of star-studded velvet that stretched on and on.

There had been days of waiting and of watching. More days of waiting and of watching loomed ahead.

Waiting for that warning flicker on the instrument panel, that split second warning before red ruin struck as cranky fuel went haywire.

Waiting for the "tick" of a tiny meteor against the ship's steel wall . . . the tiny, ringing sound that would be the prelude to disaster.

Waiting for something else . . . for that unknown factor of accident that would spatter the ship and the two men in it through many empty miles.

Endless hours of watching and of waiting, hastily snatched cat-naps in the chair, hastily snatched meals. Listening to the babbling Jimmy Baldwin who wondered how his flowers were getting on, speculated on what the boys were doing back in the rocket camp on Earth.

One thing hammered at Scott Nixon's brain . . . the message of the Martian radio, the message that had been coming now for many years. "*No. No. No come. Danger.*" Always that and little else. No explanation of what the danger was. No suggestion for circumventing or correcting that danger. No helpfulness in Earthmen's struggle to cross the miles of space between two neighboring planets.

Almost as if the Martians didn't want Earthmen to come. Almost as if they were trying to discourage space travel. But that would hardly be the case, for the Martians had readily cooperated in establishing communications, had exhibited real intelligence and earnestness in working out the code that flashed words and thoughts across millions of miles.

Without a doubt, had they wished, the

Martians could have helped. For it was with seemingly little effort that they sent their own rockets to earth.

And why had each Martian rocket carried the same load each time? Could there be some significance in those Maritan lily seeds? Some hidden meaning the Earth had failed to grasp? Some meaning that the things from Mars hoped would be read with each new rocket-load?

Why hadn't the Martians come themselves? If they could shoot automatic rockets across the miles of space, certainly they could navigate rockets carrying themselves.

The Martian rockets had been closely studied back on Earth but had yielded no secrets. The fuel always was exhausted. More than likely the Martians knew, to the last drop, how much was needed. The construction was not unlike Earth rockets, but fashioned of a steel that was hardened and toughened beyond anything Earth could produce.

So for ten years Earthmen had worked unaided to cross the bridge of space, launching ships from the Earth's most favored take-off point, from the top of Mt. Kenya, heading out eastward into space, taking advantage of the mountain's three mile height, the Earth's rotation speed of 500 yards per second at the equator.

Scott reviewed his flight, checked the clocklike routine he had followed. Blast-off from Earth. Landing in the drear, desolate Mare Serenitatis on the Moon, refueling the ship from the buried storage tanks, using the caterpillar tractor from the underground garage to haul the rocket onto the great turn-table cradle. Setting the cradle at the correct angle and direction, blasting off again at the precise second, carrying a full load of fuel, something impossible to do and still take off from Earth. Taking advantage of the Moon's lower gravity, its lack of atmosphere. Using the Moon as a stepping stone to outer space.

Now he was headed for Mars. If he landed there safely, he could spend two days, no more, no less, before he blasted off for Earth again.

But probably he wouldn't reach Mars. Probably he and Jimmy Baldwin, in the end, would be just a few more bones to pave the road to Mars.

III

A GIGANTIC building, rising to several hundred feet in height, domed, without door or window, stood lonely in the vastness of the red plain that stretched to the far-off black horizon.

The building and nothing more. No other single sign of habitation. No other evidence of intelligent life.

The Martian lilies were everywhere, great fields of them, bright scarlet against the redness of the sand. But in its native soil the Martian lily was a sorry thing, a poor apology for the kind of flower that grew on Earth. Stunted, low-growing, with smaller and less brilliant flowers.

The sand gritted under Scott's boots as he took a slow step forward.

So this was Mars! Here, at the North pole . . . the single building . . . the only evidence of intelligence on the entire planet. As the ship had circled the planet, cutting down its tremendous speed, he had studied the surface in the telescopic glass and this building had been the only habitation he had seen.

It stood there, made of shimmering metal, glinting in the pale sunlight.

"Bugs," said Jimmy, at Scott's elbow.

"What do you mean, bugs?" asked Scott.

"Bugs in the air," said Jimmy. "Flying bugs."

Scott saw them then. Things that looked like streaks of light in the feeble sunshine. Swarms of them hovered about the great building and others darted busily about.

"Bees," suggested Jimmy.

But Scott shook his head. They weren't bees. They glinted and flashed when the sun's light struck them and they seemed more mechanical than life-like.

"Where are the Martians?" Jimmy demanded.

"I don't know, Jimmy," declared Scott. "Damned if I do."

He had envisioned the first Earthmen reaching Mars as receiving thunderous ovation, a mighty welcome from the Martians. But there weren't any Martians. Nothing stirred except the shining bugs and the lilies that nodded in a thin, cold breeze.

There was no sound, no movement. Like a quiet summer afternoon back on Earth, with a veil of quietness drawn over the

flaming desert and the shimmering building.

He took another step, walking toward the great building. The sand grated protestingly beneath his boot-heels.

Slowly he approached the building, alert, watching, ready for some evidence that he and Jimmy had been seen. But no sign came. The bugs droned overhead, the lilies nodded sleepily. That was all.

Scott looked at the thermometer strapped to the wrist of his oxygen suit. The needle registered 10 above, Centigrade. Warm enough, but the suits were necessary, for the air was far too thin for human consumption.

Deep shadow lay at the base of the building and as he neared it, Scott made out something that gleamed whitely in the shadow. Something that struck a chord of remembrance in his brain, something he had seen back on Earth.

As he hurried forward he saw it was a cross. A white cross thrust into the sand.

With a cry he broke into a run.

Before the cross he dropped to his knees and read the crudely carved inscription on the wood. Just two words. The name of a man, carved with a jack-knife:

HARRY DECKER

Harry Decker! Scott felt his brain swimming crazily.

Harry Decker here! Harry Decker under the red sand of Mars! But that couldn't be. Harry Decker's name couldn't be here. It was back on Earth, graven on that scroll of bronze. Graven there directly beneath the name of Hugh Nixon.

He staggered to his feet and stood swaying for a moment.

From somewhere far away he heard a shout and swinging around, ran toward the corner of the building.

Rounding it, he stopped in amazement.

There, in the shelter of the building, lay a rusted space ship and running across the sand toward him was a space-suited figure, a figure that yelled as it ran and carried a bag over its shoulder, the bag bouncing at every leap.

"Hugh!" yelled Scott.

And the grotesque figure bellowed back.

"Scott, you old devil! I knew you'd do it! I knew it was you the minute I heard the rocket blasts!"

"IT'S nice and warm here now," said Hugh, "but you'd ought to spend a winter here. An Arctic blizzard is a gentle breeze compared with the Martian pole in winter time. You don't see the Sun for almost ten months and the mercury goes down to 100 below, Centigrade. Hoar frost piles up three and four feet thick and a man can't stir out of the ship."

He gestured at the bag.

"I was getting ready for another winter. Just like a squirrel. My supplies got low before this spring and I had to find something to store up against another season. I found a half dozen different kinds of bulbs and roots and some berries. I've been gathering them all summer, storing them away."

"But the Martians?" protested Scott. "Wouldn't the Martians help you?"

His brother looked at him curiously.

"The Martians?" he asked.

"Yes, the Martians."

"Scott," Hugh said, "I haven't found the Martians."

Scott stared at him. "Let's get this straight now. You mean you don't know who the Martian are?"

Hugh nodded. "That's exactly it. I tried to find them hard enough. I did all sorts of screwy things to contact that intelligence which talked with the Earth and sent the rockets full of seed, but I've gotten exactly nowhere. I've finally given up."

"Those bugs," suggested Scott. "The shining bugs."

Hugh shook his head. "No soap. I got the same idea and managed to bat down a couple of them. But they're mechanical. That's all. Just machines. Operated by radium."

"It almost drove me nuts at first. Those bugs flying around and the building standing there and the Martian lilies all around, but no signs of any intelligence. I tried to get into the building but there aren't any doors or windows. Just little holes the bugs fly in and out of."

"I couldn't understand a thing. Nothing seemed right. No purpose to any of it. No apparent reason. Only one thing I could understand. Over on the other side of the building I found the cradle that is used to shoot the rockets to Earth. I've watched that done."

"But what happened?" asked Scott.

"Why didn't you come back? What happened to the ship?"

"We had no fuel," said Hugh.

Scott nodded his head.

"A meteor in space."

"Not that," Hugh told him. "Harry simply turned the petcocks, let our gasoline run into the sand."

"Good Lord! Was he crazy?"

"That's exactly what he was," Hugh declared. "Batty as a bedbug. Touch of space madness. I felt sorry for him. He cowered like a mad animal, beaten by the sense of loneliness and space. He was afraid of shadows. He got so—he didn't act like a man. I was glad for him when he died."

"But even a crazy man would want to get back to Earth!" protested Scott.

"It wasn't Harry," Hugh explained. "It was the Martians, I am sure. Whatever or wherever they are, they probably have intelligences greater than ours. It would be no feat for them, perhaps, to gain control of the brain of a demented man. They might not be able to dominate us, but a man whose thought processes were all tangled up by space madness would be an easy mark for them. They could make him do and think whatever they wanted him to think or do. It wasn't Harry who opened those petcocks, Scott. It was the Martians."

He leaned against the pitted side of the ship and stared up at the massive building.

"I was plenty sore at him when I caught him at it," he said. "I gave him one hell of a beating. I've always been sorry for that."

"What finally happened to him?" asked Scott.

"He ran out of the airlock without his suit," Hugh explained. "It took me half an hour to run him down and bring him back. He took pneumonia. You have to be careful here. Exposure to the Martian atmosphere plays hell with a man's lung tissues. You can breathe it all right . . . might even be able to live in it for a few hours, but it's deadly just the same."

"Well, it's all over now," declared Scott. "We'll get my ship squared around and we'll blast off for Earth. We made it here and we can make it back. And you'll be the first man who ever set his foot on Mars."

Hugh grinned. "That will be something, won't it, Scott? But somehow I'm not satisfied. I haven't accomplished a thing. I haven't even found the Martians. I know they're here. An intelligence that's at least capable of thinking along parallel lines with us although its thought processes may not be parallel with ours."

"We'll talk it over later," said Scott. "After we get a cup of coffee into you. I bet you haven't had one in weeks."

"Weeks," jeered Hugh. "Man, it's been ten months."

"Okay, then," said Scott. "Let's round up Jimmy. He must be around here somewhere. I don't like to let him get out of my sight too much."

THE silence of the dreaming red deserts was shattered by a smashing report that drummed with a mighty clap against the sky above. A gush of red flame spouted over the domed top of the mighty building and metal shards hammered spitefully against the sides, setting up a metallic undertone to the ear-shattering explosion.

Sick with dread, Scott plunged to the corner of the building and felt the sick dread deepen.

Where his space ship had lain a mighty hole was blasted in the sand. The ship was gone. No part of it was left. It had been torn into tiny fragments and hurled across the desert. Wisps of smoke crept slowly from the pit in the sand, twitting in the air currents that still swirled from the blast.

Scott knew what had happened. There was no need to guess. Only one thing could have happened. The liquid oxygen had united with the gasoline, making an explosive that was sheer death itself. A single tremor, a thrown stone, a vibration . . . anything would set it off.

Across the space between himself and the ship came the tattered figure of a man. A man whose clothes were torn. A man covered with blood, weaving, head down, feet dragging.

"Jimmy!" yelled Scott.

He sprinted forward but before he could reach his side, Jimmy had collapsed.

Kneeling beside him, Scott lifted the man's head.

The eyes rolled open and the lips

twitched. Slow, tortured words oozed out.

"I'm sorry . . . Scott. I don't know why. . ."

The eyes closed but opened again, a faint flutter, and more words bubbled from the bloody lips

"I wonder why I did it!"

Scott looked up and saw his brother standing in front of him.

Hugh nodded. "The Martians again, Scott. They could use Jimmy's mind. They could get hold of him. That blasted brain of his. . ."

Scott looked down at the man in his arms. The head had fallen back, the eyes were staring, blood was dripping on the sand.

"Hugh," he whispered, "Jimmy's dead."

Hugh stared across the sand at the little glimmer of white in the shadow of the building.

"We'll make another cross," he said.

IV

THE Martians hadn't wanted them to come. That much, at least, was clear. But having gotten here, the Martians had no intention of letting them return to Earth again. They didn't want them to carry back the word that it was possible to navigate across space to the outer planet.

Maybe the Martians were committed to a policy of isolation. Maybe there was a "Hands Off" sign set up on Mars. Maybe a "No trespassing" sign.

But if that had been the case, why had the Martians answered the radio calls from Earth. Why had they co-operated with Dr. Alexander in working out the code that made communication possible? And why did they continue sending messages and rockets to the Earth? Why didn't they sever diplomatic relationship entirely, retire into their isolation?

If they didn't want Earthmen to come to Mars why hadn't they trained guns on the two ships as they came down to the scarlet sand, wiped them out without compunction? Why did they resort to the expedient of forcing Earthmen to bring about their own destruction? And why, now that Harry Decker and Jimmy Baldwin were dead, didn't the Martians wipe out the remaining two of the unwanted race?

Perhaps the Martians were merely efficient, not vindictive. Maybe they realized that the remaining two Earthmen constituted no menace? And maybe, on the other hand, the Martians had no weapons. Perhaps they never had held a need for weapons. It might be they had never had to fight for self preservation.

And above and beyond all . . . what and where were the Martians? In that huge building? Invisible? In caverns beneath the surface? At some point far away?

Maybe . . . perhaps . . . why? Speculation and wonderment.

But there was no answer. Not even the slightest hint. Just the building shimmering in the unsetting Sun, the metallic bugs buzzing in the air, the lilies nodding in the breeze that blew across the desert

SCOTT NIXON reached the rim of the plateau and lowered the bag of roots from his shoulder, resting and waiting for Hugh to toil up the remaining few yards of the slope.

Before him, slightly over four miles across the plain, loomed the Martian building. Squatting at its base was the battered, pitted space ship. There was too much ozone in the atmosphere here for the steel in the ship to stand up. Before many years had passed it would fall to pieces, would rust away. But that made little difference, for by that time they probably wouldn't need it. By that time another ship would have arrived or they would be dead.

Scott grinned grimly. A hard way to look at things. But the only way. One had to be realistic here. Hard-headed planning was the only thing that would carry them through. The food supply was short and while they'd probably be able to gather enough for the coming winter, there was always the possibility that the next season would find them short.

But there was hope to cling to. Always hope. Hope that the summer would bring another ship winging out of space . . . that this time, armed by past experience, they could prevent its destruction.

Hugh came up with Scott, slid the bag of roots to the ground and sat upon it.

He nodded at the building across the desert.

"That's the nerve center of the whole business," he declared. "If we could get

into it." . . . His voice trailed away.

"But we can't," Scott reminded him. "We've tried and we can't. There are no doors. No openings. Just those little holes the bugs fly in and out of."

"There's a door somewhere," said Hugh. "A hidden door. The bugs use it to bring out machines to do the work when they shoot a rocket out for Earth. I've seen the machines. Screwy looking things. Work units pure and simple but so efficient you'd swear they possessed intelligence. I've tried to find the door but I never could and the bugs always waited until I wasn't around before they moved the machines in or out of the building."

He chuckled, scrubbing his bearded face with a horny hand.

"That rocket business saved my life," he said. "If the power lead running out of the building to the cradle hadn't been there I'd been sunk. But there it was, full of good, old electricity. So I just tapped the thing and that gave me plenty of power . . . power for heat, for electrolysis, for atmospheric condensation."

Scott sank down heavily on his sack.

"It's enough to drive a man nuts," he declared. "We can reach out and touch the building with our hand. Just a few feet away from the explanation of all this screwiness. Inside that building we'd find things we'd be able to use. Machines, tools . . ."

Hugh hummed under his breath.

"Maybe," he said, "maybe not. Maybe we couldn't recognize the machines, fathom the tools. Mechanical and technical development here probably wasn't any more parallel to ours than intelligence development."

"There's the rocket cradle," retorted Scott. "Same principle as we use on Earth. And they must have a radio in there. And a telescope. We'd be able to figure them out. Might even be able to send Doc Alexander a message."

"Yeah," agreed Hugu, "I thought of that, too. But we can't get in the building and that settles it."

"The bugs get under my skin," Scott complained. "Always buzzing around. Always busy. But busy at what? Like a bunch of hornets."

"They're the straw bosses of the outfit," declared Hugu. "Carrying out the orders

of the Martians. The Martians' hands and eyes you might say."

He dug at the sand with the toe of his space boot.

"Another swarm of them took off just before we started out on this trip," he said. "While you were in the ship. I watched them until they disappeared. Straight up and out until you couldn't see them. Just like they were taking off for space."

He kicked savagely at the sand.

"I sure as hell would like to know where they go," he said.

"There've been quite a few of them leaving lately," said Scott. "As if the building were a hive and they were new swarms of bees. Maybe they're going out to start new living centers. Maybe they're going to build more buildings. . . ."

HE stopped and stared straight ahead of him, his eyes unseeing. Going out to start new living centers! Going out to build new buildings! Shining metallic buildings!

Like a cold wind from the past it came to him, a picture of that last night on Earth. He heard the whining wind on Mt. Kenya once again, the blaring of the radio from the machine shop door, the voice of the newscaster.

"Austin Gordon . . . Congo Valley . . . strange metallic city . . . inhabited by strange metallic insects!"

The memory shook him from head to foot, left him cold and shivery with his knowledge.

"Hugh!" he croaked. "Huge, I know what it's all about!"

His brother stared at him: "Take it easy, kid. Don't let it get you. Stick with me, kid. We're going to make it all right."

"But, Hugh," Scott yelled, "there's nothing wrong with me. Don't you see, I know the answer to all this Martian business now. The lilies are the Martians! Those bugs are migrating to Earth. They're machines. Don't you see . . . they could cross space and the lilies would be there to direct them."

He jumped to his feet.

"They're already building cities in the Congo!" he yelled. "Lord knows how many other places. They're taking over the Earth! The Martians are invading the Earth, but Earth doesn't know it!"

"Hold on," Hugh yelled back at him. "How could flowers build cities?"

"They can't," said Scott breathlessly. "But the bugs can. Back on Earth they are wondering why the Martians don't use their rockets to come to Earth. And that's exactly what the Martians are doing. Those rockets full of seeds aren't tokens at all. They're colonization parties!"

"Wait a minute. Slow down," Hugh pleaded. "Tell me this. If the lilies are the Martians and they sent seeds to Earth twelve years ago, why hadn't they sent them before?"

"Because before that it would have been useless," Scott told him. "They had to have someone to open the rockets and plant the seeds for them. We did that. They tricked us into it.

"They may have sent rockets of seeds before but if they did, nothing came of it. For the seeds would have been useless if they weren't taken from the rocket. The rocket probably would have weathered away in time, releasing the seeds but by that time the seeds would have lost their germinating power."

Hugh shook his head.

"It seems impossible," he declared. "Impossible that plants could have real intelligence . . . that flowers could hold the mastery of a planet. I'm ready to accept almost any theory but that one. . . ."

"Your mind sticks on parallel evolution," Scott argued. "There's no premise for it. On Earth animals took the spotlight, pushing the plants into a subordinate position. Animals got the head start, jumped the gun on the plants. But there's absolutely no reason why plants should not develop along precisely the same lines here that animals developed on Earth."

"BUT the Martian lily lives only one season . . . ten months . . . and then it dies," Hugh protested. "The next season's growth comes from seed. How could plants build intelligence? Each new crop would have to start all over again."

"Not necessarily," declared Scott. "Animals are born with instinct, which is nothing more or less than inherited intelligence. In mankind there are strange evidences of racial memory. Why couldn't the plants do the same thing with their seed . . . progress even a step further? Why couldn't

the seed carry, along with its other attributes, all the intelligence and knowledge of the preceding generation? That way the new plant wouldn't have to start from scratch, but would start with all the accumulated knowledge of its immediate ancestor . . . and would add to that knowledge and pass the sum total on to the generation that was to follow."

Hugh kicked absent-mindedly at the sand.

"There would be advantages in that sort of development," he agreed. "It might even be the logical course of survival on a planet like Mars. Some old Martian race, for all we know, might deliberately have shaped their development toward a plant existence when they realized the conditions toward which the planet was headed."

"A plant society would be a strange one," said Scott. "A sort of totalitarian society. Not the kind of a society animals would build . . . for an animal is an individual and a plant is not. In a plant race individuality would count for nothing, the race would count for everything. The driving force would be the preservation and advancement of the race as a whole. That would make a difference."

Hugh glanced up sharply.

"You're damned right that would make a difference," he said. "They would be a deadly race. Once they got started, nothing could stop that singleness of purpose."

His face seemed to blanch under the tan. "Do you realize what's happening?" he shouted. "For millions of years these plants have fought for bare existence on Mars. Every ounce of their effort has been toward race preservation. Every fall the bugs carefully gather all the seeds and carry them inside the building, bring them out and plant them in the spring. If it hadn't been for some arrangement like that they probably would have died out years ago. Only a few scattered patches of them left now. . . ."

"But on Earth. . . ." said Scott.

And the two of them, white-faced, stared at one another. On Earth the Martian lilies would not have to carry on a desperate fight for their very existence. On Earth they had plenty of water, plenty of sunlight, plenty of good, rich soil. On Earth they grew larger and stronger and straighter. Under such conditions what

would be the limit of their alien powers?

With the lilies multiplying each year, growing in every fence row, every garden, crowding out the farmers' crops, lining every stream, clogging every forest . . . with swarm after swarm of the metallic bugs driving out into space, heading for the Earth . . . what would happen?

How long would the lilies wait? How would they attack? Would they simply crowd out every other living thing, conquering by a sort of population pressure? Or would they develop more fully those powers of forcing animal minds to do their bidding? Or did they have, perhaps, even stronger weapons?

"Hugh," Scott rasped, "we have to warn Earth. Somehow we have to let them know."

"Yes," Hugh agreed, "but how?"

Together, limned against the barish horizon, they stood, looking across the desert toward the Martian building.

Tiny figures, dimmed by distance, scurried about the building.

Scott squinted his eyes against the desert glare.

"What are those?" he asked.

Hugh seemed to jerk out of a trance.

"The machines again," he said wearily.

"They're getting ready to shoot another rocket out to Earth. It'll be the last one of the season. Earth is drawing away again."

"More seeds," said Scott.

Hugh nodded. "More seeds. And more bugs going out. And the worst of it is that Earth doesn't know. No man in his right mind on Earth could even dimly speculate upon the possibility of high intelligence in plant life. There's no reason to. No precedent upon which to base such a speculation. Earth plants have never had intelligence."

"A message is all we need," declared Scott. "Just get word to the Earth. They'd root up every plant on the face of the entire globe. They'd . . ."

He stopped abruptly and stared out across the desert.

"The rocket," he whispered. "The rocket is going to Earth!"

Hugh swung on him fiercely.

"What are you . . ."

"We could send a message by the rocket!" yelled Scott. "They always watch for them . . . always hoping each one will carry something new. Some new thing

from Mars. It's the only way we can get a message back to Earth."

"But they won't let us near," protested Hugh. "I've tried to get up close to the cradle when they were launching one and those machines always drove me away. Didn't hurt me . . . but threatened."

"We have guns," said Scott.

"Guns," said Hugh, "wouldn't be worth a damn against them. The bullets would just glance off. Even explosive bullets wouldn't harm them."

"Sledges then," said Scott. "We'll make junk out of the damn things. We've got a couple of sledges in the ship."

Hugh looked at him levelly.

"Okay, kid, let's get going."

V

THE machines paid them no attention. No higher than a man's waist, they curiously resembled grotesque spiders. Gangling rods and arms sprouted out all over them and from their trunks sprouted waving, steel antennae.

Overhead hung a swarm of the metallic bugs evidently directing the work of making the rocket ready.

"It takes just three minutes or thereabouts from the time they finally have her ready until she blasts," said Hugh. "Whatever we are going to do has to be done in those three minutes. And we've got to hold them off until the rocket blasts. They'll suspect there's something wrong and will try to stop it but if we can hold them off. . . ."

"They must already have radioed Earth the rocket is coming," said Scott. "We always got word days in advance. Probably they won't follow up with their location messages but Doc will be watching for it anyhow."

They stood tensed, waiting, each grasping a heavy hammer.

The space about the cradle was a scene of intense, but efficient activity. Last minute adjustments were made. Readings and settings were checked. Each machine seemed to act by rote, while overhead hung the cloud of humming bugs.

"We know what we're to do," said Hugh. "We've simply got to do it."

Scott nodded.

Hugh shot a glance at him.

"Think you can hold them off, kid? It'll take a while to unscrew the inner and outer caps and we have got to get that message inside the inner container or it'll burn when the rocket hits atmosphere."

"You just get that message in and the caps back on," said Scott. "I'll hold them off for you."

Suddenly the machines scurried back from the cradle leaving a clear space of several yards around it.

"Now!" Hugh shouted and the two men charged.

The attack was a surprise. Their rush carried the line of machines between them and the cradle.

Ane machine barred Scott's way and he smashed at it savagely with the heavy hammer. The blow flung it aside, crippled, dented, half-smashed.

Hugh was already at the cradle, clambering up the superstructure.

A machine rushed at Scott, steel arms flailing. Ducking a murderous swipe, the Earthman brought his sledge into play. It sheared through the arms, smashed into the body of the machine. The stricken mechanism seemed to reel, staggered erratically, then collapsed upon the sand.

In two leaps Scott gained the superstructure scaled it and straddled the cradle. His sledge smashed savagely upon a climbing mechanism, flung it to the ground. But others were swarming up the steel lattice work. Tentacles snaked out, seeking to entrap him. A wicked blow on the leg almost brought him down.

His sledge worked steadily and at the foot of the cradle broken mechanisms bore testimony to its execution.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that Hugh had inserted the envelope carrying the message in the inner container with the seeds, was tightening the screw-cap. All that remained was to screw on the larger, heavier outer cap.

But only seconds must remain, precious seconds before the rocket blasted. And before that happened they had to be away from the cradle, for the back-lash of flames would burn them to a cinder.

Scott felt perspiration streaming over his body, running off his eyelids, blurring his sight, trickling down his nose. He heard the rasp of metal as Hugh drove home the cap with savage thrusts of the wrench.

A machine rushed up the lattice at him and he smashed at it with unreasoning fury. The head of the sledge bit deep into the metal body.

A tentacle wrapped about his leg and jerked. He felt himself losing his balance, tumbling off the cradle into the melee of threshing metal things beneath him.

THEN he was on the ground, buffeted and pounded by the maddened metal creatures. He fought savagely, blindly staggering forward. The shatterproof glass in his vision plate had been "broken," its texture smashed into a million tiny criss-cross lines, until it was like frosted glass.

He heard the tough fabric of his suit rip with a screeching sound. The bugs still were hammering against him.

The thin, acrid atmosphere of Mars burned into his nose and his lungs labored.

Unseeing, he swung his sledge in swathe-like circles. Shrieking like a wild Indian, he felt it smash and slam into the bodies of his metallic opponents.

Then the world was blotted out by a resounding roar, a Niagara of sound that beat in waves against one's body.

That was the rocket leaving.

"Hugh!" he yelled insanely. "Hugh, we did it!"

The attack had fallen away and he stood unsteadily on his feet, panting, stiff from punishment, but filled with exultation.

They had won. He and Hugh had sent the message. Earth would be warned and Mars would lose its hope of conquering a new and younger world. Whatever dreams of conquest this old red planet may have nurtured would never come to be.

He put his hands up and ripped the helmet from his head, flinging it on the ground.

The metallic machines were ringed around him, motionless, almost as if they were looking at him. Almost as if they were waiting for his next move.

Wildly he whooped at them. "Start something, damn you! Just start something!"

But the line in front of him parted and he saw the blackened thing that lay upon the sand. The twisted, blasted, crumpled thing that huddled there.

Scott dropped his sledge and a sob rose

in his throat. His hands clenched at his side and he tottered slowly forward.

He stood above the body of his brother, flung there on the sand by the searing backlash of the rocket blast.

"Hugh!" he cried, "Hugh!"

But the blackened bundle didn't stir. Hugh Nixon was dead.

Eyes bleared, Scott stared around at the machines. They were breaking up, scattering, moving away.

"Damn you," he screamed, "don't you even care?"

BUT even as he spoke, he knew they didn't care. The plant civilization of Mars was an unemotional society. It knew no love, no triumph, no defeat, no revenge. It was mechanistic, cold, logical. It did only those things which aimed at a definite end. So long as there was a chance of protecting the rocket, so long as there was hope of halting its flight after it had been tampered with, that civilization would act. But now that it was in space, now that it could not be recalled, the incident was over. There would be no further action.

Scott looked down at the man at his feet.

Harry Decker and Jimmy Baldwin and now Hugh Nixon. Three men had died here on Mars. He was the only one left. And he probably would die, too, for no man could for long breathe that Martian air and live.

What was it Hugh had said that first day?

"It plays hell with the tissues of your lungs."

He stared around him, saw the interminable red deserts and the scarlet patches of Martian lilies, nodding in the breeze. Saw the humming bugs flashing in the pale sunlight. Saw the shimmer of the mighty building that had no doors or windows.

His lungs were aching now and his throat was raw. It was harder and harder to breath.

He knelt in the sand and lifted the blackened body. Cradling it in his arms, he staggered along.

"I have to make another cross," he said.

Far overhead, in the depths of space, twinkled the blue planet whose life would never know the slavery of the emotionless race of a dying world.

Mutiny in the Void

By CHARLES R. TANNER

Manool's plan for breaking the mutiny on the *Berenice* was simplicity itself. He utterly destroyed the plants that furnished oxygen for the entire ship.

Illustration by Doolin



THE tank-room of the rocket-ship *Berenice*, where the big tanks of water-weed were kept, was so spick and span that a man needed little psy-

chology to realize that its manager was a dapper, finicky, careful little man. The room's lights were bright and efficient, the water in the tanks fresh and clean, and

there were no decaying fronds of vegetation among the thousands of stems of water-weed which, floating about in the tank, absorbed the carbon dioxide which was pumped through the water, and gave back a constant stream of tiny bubbles of oxygen.

For this "farm," as the tank-room was called, was the oxygen-producer for the rocket, and under the expert care of Manool Sarouk, the "farmer," it kept the air as fresh and wholesome as the air of Earth. Manool was proud of his work, and of the way he handled it, just as he was proud of his appearance, and the way he kept *that*.

But at the moment thoughts of pride and satisfaction were furthest from Manool Sarouk's mind. He had just opened the door of the tank-room and entered, and on his face were written terror and anxiety, and written in unmistakable characters.

For Manool had just been an unconscious eavesdropper on a conversation—a conversation between Gilligan, the tall, cadaverous "mate" of the ship, and one of the fuel-wrestlers. Manool didn't know the name of the wrestler, for most of the crew were new men, picked by Gilligan on this, his second trip with the *Berenice*.

But his name was of no moment—it was the gist of the conversation that mattered. It was that which made the dapper little "farmer" tremble with anxiety and, yes—terror. For they had spoken of mutiny—and of mutiny imminent and likely to break out at any minute.

Manool was neat, and Manool was proud, but no one would call him brave. He was frightened now—frightened almost out of his wits, and uncertain as to what he should do. He mechanically reached into the breast of his jacket and drew out a tobaccolette. He stuck it in his mouth and inhaled it, wishing it was a cigarette he was smoking. Ninety-nine "farmers" out of a hundred wasted oxygen by smoking tobacco, but not Manool. The rules said "no cigarettes," so it was "no cigarettes" for him.

He tossed the tobaccolette away before it was half empty and began to pace the floor nervously. He went to the washstand and brushed the stain of the tobaccolette from his teeth. He made a test of the air, and smiled a little as he noted

that the oxygen content was well above par. He examined the weeds, and removed a sickly looking frond or two. But his mind was not on his work, and he soon resumed his uneasy pacing.

And then there was a knock on the door. His heart flew into his mouth; he glanced around to see if there was any place to flee, and then called out weakly: "Who's there?"

"It's me—Gilligan," came the sharp voice of the mate, and Manool's panic became, if possible, greater.

"What—what do you want?" he stammered.

Gilligan's voice grew even sharper. "What's the matter with you, Manool?" he snapped. "Lemme in. I want to have a talk with you."

Manool was trembling violently, but he moved forward and unlatched the door. The tall abnormally-thin mate strode in, a sort of ingratiating smile hovering over his face.

"Nice little place you got here, Manool," he said with a forced smile. "Too bad I never had a chance to visit you here before."

He strode over to Manool's stool, the only seat in the "farm," and took possession of it. He looked about him, glanced at Manool once or twice and gradually his smile became more natural.

"Manool," he said, "you're an officer of sorts, maybe only a warrant officer, but still—you eat with them, so I've been considering you as an officer. But—well, I like you, Manool, and—you've heard more than you should, I believe, so I've come to have a little *talk* with you."

HE lowered his voice and looked around warily before he continued. Then, "Manool," he said. "I'm going to make things plain. You heard me talkin' to Larry, a while ago, and you must be suspicious. Well, your suspicion is right. There's going to be mutiny aboard this hunk of fireworks and Cap Tarrant is going to lose his job. Know why? 'Cause I'm one of Huddersfield's men, and I've been working to seize this ship for eight months."

Manool shuddered.

"Huddersfield, the Cerean?" he asked.

"The very same! Huddersfield has seized

an asteroid and intends to start a fleet of rockets. He's got a couple already and this'll be his third. When we get enough, things'll pop, I'll tell you.

"Now listen, Manool—you can throw in with us and go in for Huddersfield, or you can run and tell Cap Tarrant—and get your bloody knob knocked off when we take the ship. 'Cause the men are all with me, Manool, all of 'em, and there ain't a chance of Tarrant winning if it comes to battle."

He stopped, evidently waiting for Manool to speak. The little farmer looked up miserably. "But—what can I do?" he cried, plaintively. "Me, I ain't no fighter, Gilligan. You don't want me for a fighter in your crew."

Gilligan stood up, smiling broadly. Manool's obvious terror of him seemed to have reassured him considerably. He winked confidently.

"Manool," he said. "Your business is to keep the air clean, and that's all you have to do. Except to keep your mouth shut, too. 'Cause if you peep to the Captain, or to Navigator Rogers, you'll be the first to die when we cut loose. But—" He winked again and his smile broadened. "You keep the wind fair and the trap closed, and you won't be forgotten."

HE gave one final wink and stepped out, closing the door behind him. And he left Manool in a turmoil of uncertainty. The little farmer knew well where his duty lay. If he did the right thing, he'd go at once to Captain Tarrant and inform him of the impending rebellion. But, if he did, Gilligan would surely get him. He knew well that the threat the thin mate had made had been no idle one.

But if he didn't inform the captain—if he didn't, he'd be a mutineer, too. And he'd have to take his share, and leave the earth, a fugitive, and probably cast his lot with the infamous Huddersfield. He certainly didn't want to do that, either.

He strode back and forth in the tank-room, a victim of uncertainty. He didn't know *what* to do, he told himself, plaintively. . . . He still didn't know, when dinner time came.

Manool's abstraction at the dinner table was so noticeable that young Captain Tarrant was forced to speak of it.

"Where's your appetite, Sarouk?" he asked. "You haven't even finished your soup. Aren't you feeling well?"

Manool's face reddened as he answered, but old Doc Slade looked up and eyed Manool keenly.

"You better come in and see me after dinner, Sarouk," he suggested. "Maybe you got something wrong and I'll have some work to do. You stop in and see me."

Manool was about to insist that he had nothing wrong with him, when he caught Doc's eye, and realized that the old man knew something. And then he realized that here was opportunity knocking. He could go in and see Doc Slade, and Gilligan would never suspect anything. He rose from the table murmuring: "I'll be in and see you in a few minutes, Doc." Then hurried back to the farm.

He entered the tank-room and checked everything again. He put on a clean shirt, and brushed his teeth and combed his straight black hair. Then, after a moment's consideration, he brushed his teeth again. Doc might take a notion to examine him, and he certainly didn't want his teeth to be soiled, if Doc looked at his mouth and throat.

He was about to leave the tank-room when he heard a cry from somewhere down the passage. It was a startled cry, and it was followed by a sharp command that ended in an oath. His heart leaped into his mouth. Not an officer on the ship ever used profanity to the men. Besides, he'd have recognized the voice of any of the four officers. That command had been shouted by one of the men, and the cry that had preceded it had been one of surprise. Had the mutiny started already?

As if in answer to his question, the sharp report of an automatic rang out suddenly through the passageway. Manool swung the door shut and ducked back as suddenly as if the bullet had been fired at him. He was beginning to tremble; he felt a smothering constriction of his throat, and yet, at the same time, an unreasoning thrill of excitement was rising within him. He felt an overpowering desire to see what was going on outside.

For many minutes his caution overcame his curiosity, but at last the continual silence convinced him that, in all probability,

the mutiny was over. So, ever so slowly, he stepped out into the corridor and started down. The hall where he had heard the shot proved to be quite empty, and he wondered where everybody was. This was certainly a queer mutiny, nothing like any he had ever read about. He trod more and more cautiously, and it dawned on him that this silence was more fearsome than tumult would have been.

He was passing a store-room just then, and when he was just abreast of the door, it was flung suddenly open and there was one of the fuel-wrestlers, with a loaded automatic leveled at Manool's chest, and a spiteful look in his eyes.

Manool's reaction was almost automatic. He threw up his hands and shouted, "Don't shoot." And from behind the fuel-wrestler, another voice—Gilligan's—said, "Let him alone, it's the farmer." Then it grew sharper as the mate snapped, "Get in here, Manool. What are you doin' wanderin' around in the halls? You want to get shot?"

Manool was almost too scared to speak. "I was looking for you," he answered. "I think the fight is all over, so I look for you."

"It ain't all over, by a dam' sight," Gilligan snarled. "You seen Doc Slade?"

"I ain't seen nobody," Sarouk answered, truthfully. "I just came out of the farm and walked down here. I hear a shot, while ago."

"That was when we took a pop at Slade. I think he must have had some suspicions, the way he acted. Now, look, Manool," the mate went on, "this stuff ain't exactly in your line. You better go back to the farm and lay low till I call you."

Manool was still a little trembly from the scare he'd got when he saw the pistol pointed at his breast. He nodded enthusiastically at Gilligan's suggestion, darted to the door and, running down the corridor, he crept into the tank-room without another word.

HE was in the tank-room, alone, for hours, it seemed. It was almost time for supper when there was a knock on the door, and when he hesitatingly opened it, Gilligan came in with a big smile on his face.

"Well, it's all over but the shoutin',

Manool," he boasted. "We've got Tarrant and Navigator Rogers cooped up in the dining room. They've got food and water, and they've locked themselves in, but we got a guard posted at the door, and we'll get 'em if they make a break. We got Doc Slade, too—alive. He fought like a tiger, hurt two of the boys before we nailed him, but we took him, alive, and we're holding him, up in the weighin' room. Cookie's stirred up some supper, so come on up and eat. You needn't be afraid," he added as an afterthought. "The fighting's all over."

Manool followed him out of the door and down the passageway. They went up the stairs to the loading room near the central axis of the rocket; Manool feeling again the dizziness that he always felt when he lost weight. He had never really become a spaceman, in spite of all his years in space. He walked a little uncertainly and giddily into the room, a pace or two behind Gilligan.

The entire crew was there. Doc Slade was there, too. He had a black eye and a long, deep scratch down one side of his face. His hands were tied, and he was seated on a stool with his legs tied to the stool's. Doc's eyes widened when he saw Manool walk in with Gilligan; then a look of scorn came into them and he turned his head away. Manool squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze—he liked Doc Slade, and Doc had always liked him, up to now. He hoped these fellows wouldn't hurt the old Doc.

The table was set and the crew were about to sit down to eat. Manool was seated beside Gilligan, and they untied Doc's hands and sat him down, too, at the opposite end of the table.

The meal was sheer torture to the little farmer. The crew ignored him, Gilligan ignored him, and Doc Slade—Doc wouldn't ignore him, and Manool wished he would. Before the meal was over, Manool was in an agony of anxiety. He wondered what would become of Tarrant and Rogers; he wondered what they'd do to Doc Slade; he wondered also what they were going to do to him.

The crew was uproariously jovial. They had broken out a case of gin that one of them had probably smuggled aboard, and they lit cigarettes and split a bottle and

were having a glorious time. It grew more glorious after the third bottle, and one of them brought up the suggestion that they divide the cargo among them right then, to "see what they were going to get."

Gilligan frowned and tried to wave the suggestion down, but a half dozen voices snarled angrily at his refusal, and the slim mate was forced to acquiesce with as good grace as possible. A loader was delegated to guard Doc Slade, then the entire remainder of the crew started aft to the "hold."

In those days, ships usually carried things that were mighty hard to get or make on Mars, and were not too scarce on Earth. In this case, there was a ton of U235, a lot of organic chemicals that still couldn't be synthesized from their elements, and an assortment of odds and ends that were prized by the Martian natives in spite of their cheapness.

Into the bins where this stuff was stored, the shouting pirates who had lately been a well-behaved crew swarmed, shouting and pushing, and laying claim to this and that and the other; and in less than five minutes, three separate fights started. Gilligan stormed, threatened, and at last resorted to violence.

"This stuff'll never be divided fair if you lugs try to settle it by fightin' for it," he roared after he had clipped a couple of them. "What do you think you are, a bunch of pirates? You fools kill each other off, and who brings the ship into port, eh? How long do you think you'd go on livin', if we go short-handed and damage this can on landin'? Huddersfield would kill you off like flies for that. Now calm down and let's get this thing settled."

They stood meekly enough after that, while Gilligan looked the cargo over and assigned this portion to this fellow, that portion to that. He had apportioned a large part of the spoils to them when he came to a dozen or so large corrugated boxes. He read one of the labels and broke out into laughter.

"Look at this, you lugs," he chuckled. "Who's going to get this for his share?"

The others looked and grins began to spread over their faces. The labels said: "*Dentogleme Tooth Powd.* 1/2 Gr. 4 oz." The grins became laughs, and a dozen eyes

turned to Manool. The little farmer felt his face begin to redden; it dawned on him that his habit of dental fastidiousness was not unknown to the crew. Gilligan's next remark made it obvious that this was the truth.

"Manool," he said. "This stuff was probably goin' to Mars to polish the teeth of them shark-jawed natives. But it would have been wasted there, Manool, wasted. But now, Manool, it shall be awarded to you, who'll value it, in appreciation of all you done for us, durin' the mutiny."

His eyes hardened for a moment as if in anticipation of a complaint; then, seeing nothing in Manool's eyes but plaintive acquiescence, he went on: "Take it, Manool, and get out o' here. Take it down to the farm and gloat over it, farmer. There's enough there to last even you for twenty years."

The crew looked at him, looked at the dazed Manool, and burst into spasms of laughter. They poked jibes at him, made obscene puns at his expense, and Manool stood there, taking it all in and getting redder and redder.

He wished futilely that he had had time to do something before the mutiny. He wished that it wasn't too late to do something, now. Then he realized that there *was* something for him to do now. Gilligan was ordering him again, in no uncertain terms, to get that tooth-powder down to his tank-room. He smiled weakly at the ring-leader and picked up one box.

FOR the next half hour he was busy carrying his "fortune" down to his quarters. And it is doubtful if, in all his life, Manool Sarouk had ever been so miserable. He upbraided himself at every step for his cowardice and vacillation. He racked his brain, striving to devise some brilliant plan to circumvent the mutineers; and even as he did so, another part of his mind was scoffing at the futility of daring to oppose that group of ruffians. By the time he came back for the last box, he had admitted the absurdity of even trying it.

They had emptied the gin bottles by that time. Some of them were singing, and some were shooting craps, gambling with their share of the cargo. Gilligan

and a couple of others were gathered around Doc Slade. They had removed his bonds and had evidently been talking to him.

"You'll take a chance with us or you'll take a chance with them two in the officer's mess," Gilligan was saying, menacingly, as Manool entered. It was evident that he had shared in the gin since Manool had started his work. He was looking ugly and seemed to be feeling the same way.

Doc Slade's lip was curling with contempt before Gilligan had finished his sentence. "There's no choice," the doctor spat. "You give me passage to the mess-room and I'll go, right now. What have I got in common with a pack of space-rats like these? I don't like the smell of you, even."

"Okeh!" Gilligan snarled, with an air of finality that showed that he was ending what had been an attempt to persuade Slade to join them. "I'll give you passage, Git out o' here and git down to the dinin' room."

He flung the door open and gestured out into the passageway. Doc Slade looked at him, with a look in his eyes that Manool couldn't fathom. "Git!" repeated Gilligan, and drew his weapon. "Git out o' here before I forget myself and let you have a dose o' this."

Doc hesitated the briefest second, then he shrugged and stepped out of the door. He started down the passageway swiftly, and Manool noticed that he neither slackened his pace nor looked backward. He was some sixty feet away when Gilligan muttered to the two or three who had crowded to the door, "All right. Let him have it!"

And to Manool's horror, a half dozen shots cracked and echoed in the narrow confines of the hall. Doc staggered, put out a hand to the bulkhead, coughed and slumped to the floor. Gilligan ran forward and put another bullet in him.

MANOOOL didn't even wait until Gilligan came back into the room. He grabbed up his last box mechanically and ran to the steps. His mind was a chaos of horror; he was choking, his eyes were filling with tears and he was aware of only one thought—to get to the steps before a bullet smacked into his back, too.

He stumbled down the steps and along the corridor, sobbing as he went. They had killed Doc Slade. Killed him in cold blood. They'd kill the other officers, too, if they got the chance. There was no good in them, there was no hope in trying to placate them and appeal to their good nature. At any moment, they'd be likely to take a notion to kill him, too; just for the fun of the thing! He hardly knew what he was doing by the time he entered the tank-room and dropped the box of tooth-powder onto the others and then slammed the door shut and locked it.

For a while he was a little hysterical. He sobbed; he walked the floor; he beat his temples with his fists, and wondered if he could kill himself. He could see before him, with awful clarity, the form of Doc Slade, lying as he had lain in the passageway, with a gradually spreading pool of blood beneath his head.

He covered his face with his hands and wept anew. He kicked savagely at the boxes that were the price of his neutrality in this little war. He felt that he was the lowest, the most despicable coward in history. He wrung his hands and wept again. And at last, in time, his eyes dried and he took a deep breath.

There was a new look in his eyes. The thought had come to him suddenly, that he held the lives of these madmen in his own hand. Of course, he did! He had been worrying so much about the safety of his own paltry life that this thought had been entirely overlooked. He was the farmer on this ship! What was he weeping and wailing for, when every one of them depended for their air on his continued attention to the tanks?

Why, they were a good twenty million miles from the nearest space-port. If he wanted to die, if he was willing to give his life, he could destroy those tanks of vegetation, and not a man on this rocket would live to land on a planet again.

He stood up and threw out his chest. He inhaled deeply—and smothered an involuntary sob. He went to the wash-bowl and washed his face and eyes and combed his lank, black hair. He absently reached for his tooth-brush, then he shuddered. But habit was too great; in spite of the feeling of revulsion that the very thought of tooth-powder brought to him, he wound

up by carefully brushing his teeth. Then he felt better.

He started to turn away from the wash-bowl and suddenly stopped. He turned back quickly and seized the can of tooth-powder standing there. He picked it up, poured some of the powder into his hand and let a drop or two of water fall on it. A sinister grin began to spread over his face—if he handled this thing right, the joke they had made in giving him the tooth-powder was going to back-fire with a vengeance.

He sat down and began to think.

He sat there for almost half an hour. Once he got up and went over and examined the openings to the ventilator pipes. He removed the screen from one of them, a pipe about two feet in diameter, and looked into the blackness of the pipe's interior. What he saw evidently satisfied him, for he smiled again and went back to resume his pensive pose.

At last, he rose and with the grim smile playing on his face he went to work. He climbed up into the ventilator pipe he had examined, and started to worm his way into its dark maw. His legs kicked futilely for a moment, then he was hunching his way along through the tube.

He worked his way along for a dozen yards or so, then he came to a place where the tube divided in two. He unhesitatingly chose the path to the right—he knew these tubes well enough to traverse them with his eyes shut, even though he had never seen them from the inside before. After a few yards of further crawling, he saw a light ahead and increased his speed. Before long, he was lying in front of a grating and looking out into the officer's mess-room.

He could see Tarrant and Rogers. They were seated disconsolately at the table, speaking little, apparently, for Manool watched them for five minutes before he tried to attract their attention, and in all that time, Tarrant only spoke once. When Manool tapped on the grating, they looked up startled, and reached for their weapons. Rogers was unable to locate the rapping and swung about a little wildly until Tarrant pointed out the ventilator opening. Then he recognized Manool before Tarrant did.

"It's the farmer," he exclaimed, in sur-

prise. "What are you doing up there, Sarouk?"

Manool beckoned them over to the ventilator.

"Don't talk too loud," he cautioned in a hoarse whisper. "I can't say much. Somebody is guarding outside the door, maybe they hear me. They kill Doc Slade and the chemist. I got a scheme. You take this grating off, while I go back to the farm and get something."

HE backed away without waiting for an answer and made his way slowly back to the farm. He picked up one of his boxes of tooth-powder and hoisted it up to the ventilator shaft, shoving it back as far as he could. Then he climbed in after it and began his journey back to the mess-room, pushing the box ahead of him. It was slow work, but he made it at last, and called softly to Tarrant to come and get the box.

"What's this all about, Manool?" demanded the captain, but Manool refused to answer.

"Can't talk too much, Captain," he whispered. "Got to hurry. If someone tries to come in farm before I get these boxes over here, this whole plan be shot. Don't you talk now, please."

Tarrant nodded his understanding and Manool started back for another box of tooth-powder. As he hunched his way along, he heard Tarrant say to Rogers, quite plainly: "Think he knows what he's doing, Ike?"

He smiled bitterly. It seemed impossible for anyone to expect anything important could be accomplished by little Manool Sarouk. Well, if things went right, he was certainly going to show them, this time.

In spite of his haste, and in spite of the fact that Rogers helped him after the third trip, it was some little time before Manool dropped down in the tank-room after that last box. He heaved a huge sigh of relief as he put it into the ventilator shaft, and turned to do the one thing left to do. This was the one job he hated, but it was the most important job of all. He went to his locker and got out a big bottle and poured liquid from it into every one of the tanks. He turned off a valve under each tank and took a hammer and

beat the valve-handle into uselessness. Then, after checking to make sure he hadn't overlooked anything, he climbed into the tube and started pushing that last box of tooth-powder ahead of him.

At last he reached the mess-room again and handed down his box. He climbed down, himself, and had no more than landed when Tarrant was on him with a whispered, "Come on now, Manool, tell us what this is all about."

"Just a couple minutes more, Captain," Manool pleaded. "You think they can get through that door?"

"Not a chance," Rogers spoke up.

"That's fine. Maybe, then, you help me fix that ventilator, too." They put the grill back on the ventilator, and covered it by nailing boards from the table over it.

"By-'n'by, we make that air-tight," said Manool, and gave his next order. Yes, he was giving orders to the captain and the navigator now, and he was quite conscious that he was doing so.

"You get all the bowls and pans and pots in here and fill 'em with water. No telling when those fellows decide to cut our water lines."

It took them half an hour to do that, and it wasn't until it was done that Manool felt satisfied. Then he began to break open one of the cartons of tooth-powder, explaining his plans as he did so, in the same whisper he had used all along.

"Those fellows out there got the whole ship to themselves," he said. "They got lots of food and lots of water and lots of air. They got fuel, too, and somebody who can lay an orbit for contact with Ceres. But I don't think they ever get there."

"There's a whole lot of fellows, too," said Manool, dubiously. "I think maybe the air they got won't last 'em."

"Their *air!*" ejaculated Tarrant. "Manool, you haven't monkeyed with the tanks, have you?"

"I just kill the water-weed, that's all."

"Are you nuts, little man?" asked Tarrant at last. "How in thunder are *we* going to breathe, when this air gets stale. You may smother those pirates, but we're all in the same boat here, you know."

Manool smacked his fist into his hand to emphasize his remark.

"We may be in same boat, but we three, we're in different part of this boat. Maybe them rats outside quit breathing, all right, but not us! Look here."

He seized them both by the shoulder and hauled them across the room. He broke open one of the corrugated boxes as they watched, and pulled out a gaily colored can. He opened the can and dumped the contents into a pan of water, while they looked on.

He stirred the paste in the bottom of the pan for a moment and then let out a cry of triumph.

"Aha! See there! What you think of that, by gum!"

A SERIES of bubbles was rising from the paste, rising and breaking, bringing fragments of the tooth-powder with them, giving the water a cloudy and dusty quality as they grew and joined each other, faster and faster. Manool winked.

"Maybe Manool isn't as big fool as these hoodlums think," he said proudly. "I don't know much, maybe. But, by gum, I know my business. I know about tooth-powders and I know about providing oxygen for rocket ships.

"You know what, Captain. Most tooth-powders got sodium perborate in 'em. They put it in because that perborate give off pure oxygen when you put it in water, and pure oxygen is pretty good antiseptic. Only this time, we're going to use that oxygen to keep us alive instead of killing germs."

He leaned over and took a sniff of the life-giving gas.

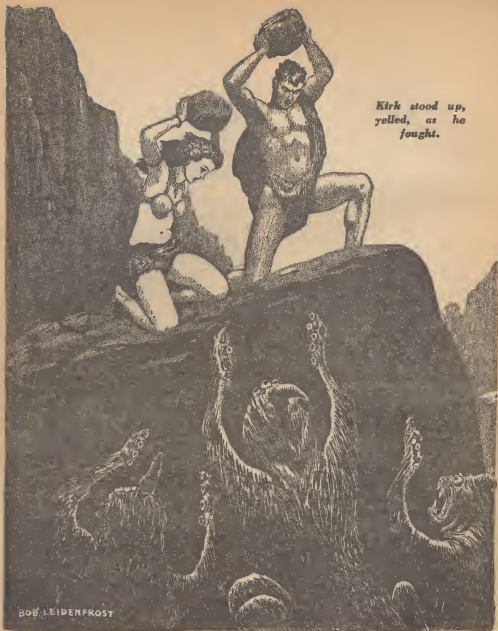
"In a day or two," he said, happily, "the air out in the rest of the rocket is going to get pretty stale. Then they try to get in here. We hold 'em out all right, then afterwards they come, offering to surrender, begging for a breath of fresh air. Ain't it nice to think that there's only enough for the three of us? If we get soft and let 'em breathe any of our air, nobody will reach port alive. So we have to be hard and let that mob of cut-throats smother to death."

He sat down and leaned back and smiled. Manool Sarouk felt pretty good. He felt satisfied with himself for the first time in a long while.

"POP" RINGER MEETS WHIFFELDORF



"THROW AWAY YOUR FISHPOLE, POP!!"
"I RUSTLED UP SOME RED MEAT!!!"



*Kirk stood up,
yelled, as he
fought.*

THRALLS OF THE ENDLESS NIGHT

By LEIGH BRACKETT

The Ship held an ancient secret that meant life to the dying cast-aways of the void. Then Wes Kirk revealed the secret to his people's enemies—and found that his betrayal meant the death of the girl he loved.



Illustration by Bob Leidenfrost

WES KIRK shut his teeth together, hard. He turned his back on Ma Kirk and the five younger ones huddled around the box of heat-stones and went to the doorway, padding soft and tight with the anger in him.

He shoved the curtain of little skins aside and crouched there with his thick shoulders fitted into the angle of the jamb, staring out, cold wind threading in across his splayed and naked feet.

The hackles rose golden and stiff across Kirk's back. He said carefully,

"I would like to kill the Captain and the First Officer and the Second Officer and all the little Officers, and the Engineers, and all their families."

His voice carried inside on the wind eddies. Ma Kirk yelled,

"Wes! You come here and let that curtain down! You want us all to freeze?" Her dark-furred shoulders moved rhythm-

ically over the rocking child. She added sharply, "Besides, that's fool's talk, Jakk Randl's talk, and only gets the sucking-plant."

"Who's to hear it?" Kirk raised his heavy over-lids and let his pupils widen, huge liquid drops spreading black across his eyeballs, sucking the dim grey light into themselves, forcing line and shape out of blurred nothingness. He made no move to drop the curtain.

The same landscape he had stared at since he was able to crawl by himself away from the box of heat-stones. Flat grey plain running right and left to the little curve of the horizon. Rocks on it, and edible moss. Wind-made gullies with grey shrubs thick in their bottoms, guarding their sour white berries with thorns and sacs of poisoned dust that burst when touched.

Between the fields and the gullies there were huts like his own, sunk into the earth and sodded tight. A lot of huts, but not as many as there had been, the old ones said. The Hans died, and the huts were empty, and the wind and the earth took them back again.

Kirk raised his shaggy head. The light of the yellow star they called Sun caught in the huge luminous blackness of his eyes.

Beyond the Hansquarter, just where the flat plain began to rise, were the Engineers. Not many of them any more. You could see the dusty lumps where the huts had been, the tumbled heaps of metal that might have meant something once, a longer time ago than anyone could remember. But there were still plenty of huts standing. Two hands and one hand and a thumb of them, full of Engineers who said how the furrows should be laid for the planting but did nothing about the tilling of them.

And beyond the Engineers—the Officers.

The baby cried. Ma Kirk shripped at her son, and two of the younger ones fought over a bone with no meat on it, rolling and snapping on the dirt floor. Kirk shifted his head forward to shut out the sound of them and followed the line of the plain upward with sullen, glowing eyes.

The huts of the Engineers were larger than those in the Hansquarter. The huts of the Officers were not much larger than the Engineers', but there were more of

them and they climbed higher up the grey slope. Five, nearly six hands of them, with the Captain's metal-roofed place highest of all.

Highest and nearest, right under the titanic shape lifting jagged against the icy stars from the crest of the ridge.

The Ship.

Kirk's voice was soft in his thick throat. "I would like to kill them," he said. "I would like to kill them all."

"Yah!" cried a shrill voice over his shoulder. "All but the Captain's yellow daughter!"

KIRK spun angrily around. Lil, next below himself, danced back out of reach, her kilt of little skins flying around her thin hips.

"Yah!" she said again, and wrinkled her flat nose. "I've seen you looking at her. All yellow from head to foot and beautiful pink lids to her eyes. You wouldn't kill her, I bet!"

"I bet I'll half kill you if you don't shut up!"

Lil stuck out her tongue. Kirk aimed a cuff at her. She danced behind his arm and jerked the curtain down and shot away again, making two jumps over the brawling young ones and the box of heat-stones.

She squatted demurely beside Ma Kirk and said, as though nothing had happened, "Ma says will you please not let so much heat out."

Kirk didn't say anything. He started to walk around the heat box. Lil yelled, "Ma!"

The young ones stopped fighting, scuttling out of reach and watching with bright moist eyes, grinning. The baby had reached the hiccupping stage.

Ma Kirk said, "Sit down, or go pick on somebody your own size."

Kirk stopped. "Aw, I wasn't going to hurt her. She has to be so smart!" He leaned forward to glare at Lil. "And I would so kill the Captain's daughter!"

The baby was quiet. Ma Kirk laid it down in a nest of skins put close to the heat and said wearily:

"You men, always talking about killing! Haven't we enough trouble without that?"

Kirk looked at the little box of heat-stones, his pupils shrinking.

"Maybe there'd be less trouble for us."

Lil poked her shock of black hair around Ma Kirk's knee. Her big eyes glowed in the feeble light.

She said, "You men! He's no man, Ma. He's just a little boy who has to stay behind and shoo the beetles out of the fields."

The young ones giggled, well out of reach. Lil's thin body was strung tight, quivering to move. "Besides," she demanded, "what have the Officers and the Engineers ever done to you that you should want to kill them—all but the Captain's yellow daughter?"

Kirk's big heavy chest swelled. "Ma," he said, "you make that brat shut up or I'll whale her, anyhow."

Ma Kirk looked at him. "Your Pa's still big enough to whale you, young man! Now you stop it, both of you."

"All right," said Kirk sullenly. He squatted down, holding his hands over the heat. His back twitched with the cold, but it was nice to have his belly warm, even if it was empty. "Wish Pa'd hurry up. I'm hungry. Hope they killed meat."

Ma Kirk sighed. "Seems like meat gets scarcer all the time, like the heat-stones."

"Maybe," said Kirk heavily, "it all goes to the same place."

Lil snorted. "And where's that, Smarty?"

His anger forced out the forbidden words.

"Where everybody says, stupid! Into the Ship."

There was suddenly a lot of silence in the room. The word "Ship" hung there, awesome and accusing. Ma Kirk's eyes flicked to the curtain over the door and back to her son.

"Don't you say things like that, Wes! You don't know."

"It's what everybody says. Why else would they guard the Ship the way they do? We can't even get near the outside of it."

Lil tossed her head. "Well neither do they."

"Not when we can see 'em, no. Of course not. But how do we know they haven't got ways of getting into the Ship that don't show from the plain? Jakk says a lot goes on that we don't know about."

He got up, forcing his belief at them with his big square hands.

"There must be something in the Ship

that they don't want us to have. Something valuable, something they want to keep for themselves. What else could it be but heat-stones and maybe dried meat?"

"We don't know, Wes! The Ship is—well, we shouldn't talk about it. And the Officers wouldn't do that. If they wanted us killed off they'd let the Piruts in on us, or the shags, and let 'em finish us quick. Freezing and starving would take too long. There'd be too many of us if we found out, or got mad."

Kirk snorted. "You women know so much. If they let the shags or the Piruts in on us, how could they stop 'em before they killed everybody, including the Officers? As for slow death—well, they think we're dumb. They've kept us away from the Ship ever since the *Crash*, and nobody knows how long ago that was. They think they can go on doing it. They think we'd never suspect."

"Yah!" said Lil sharply. "You just like to talk. Why should the Officers want us killed off anyhow?"

Kirk looked at the thin fuzzy baby curled tight in the skins.

"There aren't enough heat-stones to go around any more. Why should they let their young ones cry with the cold?"

THERE was silence in the room again. Kirk felt it, thick and choky. His heart kicked against his ribs. He was scared, suddenly. He'd never talked that much before. It was the baby, crying in the cold, that set him off. Suppose someone had heard him. Suppose he was reported for a mutineer. That meant the sucking-plant . . .

"Listen!" said Ma Kirk.

Nerves crackled icily all over Kirk's skin. But there wasn't any need to listen. The noise rolled in over them. It hit rock faces polished by the wind, and the drifts of crystalline pebbles, and it splintered into a tangle of echoes that came from everywhere at once, but there was no mistaking it. No need even to use sensitive earcups to locate its source.

The great alarm gong by the Captain's hut.

Kirk began to move, very swiftly and quietly. Before the third gong stroke hit them he had his spear and his sling and was already lifting aside the door curtain.

Ma Kirk said stiffly, "Which way are they coming?"

Kirk's ears twitched. He sorted the gong sounds, and the wind, and found a whisper underneath them, rushing up out of the gullied plain.

Kirk pointed. "From the west. Piruts, I think."

Ma Kirk sucked in her breath. Her voice had no tone in it. "Your Pa went hunting that way."

"Yeah," said Kirk. "I'll watch out for him."

He glanced back just before he let the curtain drop. The pale glow of the heat-stones picked dots of luminous blackness out of the gloom, where the still breathless faces were, watching him. He saw the blurred shapes of clay cooking pots, of low bed frames, of huddled bodies. The baby began to whimper again.

Kirk shivered in the cold wind. "Lil," he said. "I would, too, kill the Captain's yellow daughter."

"Yah," said Lil. "Go chase the beetles away."

There was no conviction in her voice. The wind was freezing on Kirk's bare feet. He dropped the curtain and went across the plain.

Men and youths like himself, old enough to fight, were spilling out of low doorways and forming companies on the flat ground. Kirk spotted Jakk Randl and fell in beside him. They stood with their backs to the wind, stamping and shivering, their head-hair and scant fur clouts blown straight out.

Randl nudged Kirk's elbow. "Look at 'em," he said, and coughed. He was always coughing, jerking his thin sharp face back and forth. Kirk could have broken his brittle light-furred body in two. All Randl's strength was in his eyes. The pupils were always spread, always hot with some bitter force, always probing. He wasn't much older than Kirk.

Kirk looked up the hill. Officers were running from the huts below the gaunt, dead Ship. They didn't look so different from the Hans, only they were built a little taller and lighter, less bowed and bunched in the shoulders, quicker on their feet.

Kirk stepped behind Randl to shield him from the wind. His voice was only a whisper, but it had a hard edge. The baby's

thin, terrible wail was still in his ears.

"Is it true, Jakk? Do you know? Because if they are . . ."

Randl laughed and shuddered with a secret, ugly triumph. "I crawled up on the peak during the last darkness. The guards were cold and the wind made them blind and deaf. I lay in the rocks and watched. And I saw . . ."

He coughed. The Officers' voices rang sharp through the wind. Compact groups of men began to run, off toward the west. The whisper of sound had grown louder in Kirk's ears. He could hear men yelling and the ringing of metal on stone.

He started to run, holding Randl's elbow. Grey dust blew under their feet. The drifts of crystal stones sent their sound shivering back at them in splinters. Kirk said fiercely:

"What did you see?"

They were passing under the hill now. Randl jerked his head. "Up there, Wes."

Kirk looked up. Someone was standing at the doorway of the Captain's hut. Someone tall and slender and the color of the Sunstar from head to foot.

"I saw her," said Randl hoarsely. "She was carrying heat-stones into the Ship."

Kirk's pupils shrank to points no warmer nor softer than the tip of his knife. He smiled, almost gently, looking up the hill.

The captain's yellow daughter, taking life into the Ship.

IT was a big raid. Kirk saw that when he scrambled up out of the last gully, half-carrying the wheezing Randl. The Piruts had come up the tongue of rock between two deep cuts and tackled the guards' pillbox head on. They hadn't taken it, not yet. But they were still trying, piling up their dead on the swept grey stone.

They were using shags again. They drove the lumbering beasts on into the hail of stones and thrown spears from the pillbox, keeping low behind them, and then climbing on the round hairy bodies. It took courage, because sometimes the shags turned and clawed the men who drove them, and sometimes the dead ones weren't quite dead and it was too bad for the man who climbed on them.

It looked to Kirk as though the pillbox was pretty far gone.

He ran down the slope with the others,

slipping in the crystal drifts. Randl was spent. Kirk kept him going, thinking of the huts back there on the plain, and Ma and Lil and the little ones, and the baby. You had to fight the Piruts, no matter what you thought about the Officers. You had to keep them from getting onto the plain.

He wondered about Pa. Hunting shags in the outer gullies was mean work any time, but when the Piruts were raiding . . .

No time to think about that. Wite, the second son of the First Officer, was signalling for double time. Kirk ran faster, his ears twitching furiously as they sifted the flying echoes into some kind of order.

Pa hadn't been alone, of course. Frank and Russ went with him. The three of them would have sense enough to keep safe. Maybe they were in the pillbox.

A big raid. More Piruts than he'd ever seen before. He wondered why. He wondered how so many of them had been able to get so close to the pillbox all at once, walking two or three abreast on the narrow tongue of rock under the spears and sling-stones.

They poured in through the gates of the stone-walled building, scattering up onto the parapet. There were slits in the rooms below and rusty metal things crouching behind them, but they weren't any good for fighting. A man needed shoulder room for spear and sling.

It was pretty hot up there. The wall of bodies had built up so high, mostly with shags, that the Piruts were coming right over the wall. Kirk's nose wrinkled at the smell of blood. He avoided the biggest puddles and found a place to stand between the dead.

Randl went down on his knees. He was coughing horribly, but his hot black eyes saw everything. He tried three times to lift his sling and gave it up.

"I'll cover you," said Kirk. He began taking crystal pebbles out of a big pile that was kept there and hurling them at the Piruts. They made a singing noise in the air, and they didn't stop going when they hit. They were heavy for their size, very heavy, with sharp edges.

Randl said, "Something funny, Wes. Too many Piruts. They couldn't risk 'em on an ordinary raid."

Kirk grunted. A Pirut with red hair standing straight in the wind came over the

wall. Kirk speared him left-handed in the belly, dodged the downstroke of his loaded sap, and kicked the body out of the way.

He said, "Wonder how they got so close, so fast?"

"Some trick." Randl laughed suddenly. "Funny their wanting the Ship as much as you and I do."

"Think they could know what's in it?"

Randl's narrow shoulders twitched. "Near as we know, their legend is the same as ours. Something holy in the Ship, sacred and tabu. Only difference is they want to get it for themselves, and we want to keep it." He coughed and spat in sudden angry disgust. "And we've swallowed that stuff. We've let the Officers hoard heat and food so they can live no matter what happens to us. We're fools, Wes! A lot of bloody fools!"

He got up and began jabbing with his spear at heads that poked up over the wall.

THE Piruts began to slack off. Stones still whistled past Kirk's head—a couple of them had grazed him by now—and spears showered down, but they weren't climbing the walls any more.

Randl grounded his spear, gasping. "That's that. Pretty soon they'll break, and then we can start thinking about . . ."

He stopped. Kirk put a stone accurately through the back of a Pirut's head and said grimly:

"Yeah. About what *we're* going to do."

Randl didn't answer. He sat down suddenly, doubled over. Kirk grinned. "Take it easy," he said softly. "I'll cover you."

Randl whispered, "Wes. Wes!" He held up one thin hand. Kirk let his own drop, looking at it. There was blood on it, running clear to the elbow.

He went down beside Randl, putting his arms around him, trying to see. Randl shook him off.

"Don't move me, you fool! Just listen." His voice was harsh and rapid. He was holding both hands over the left side of his neck, where it joined the shoulder. Kirk could see the bright blood beating up through his fingers.

He said, "Jakk, I'll get the sawbones . . ."

Hot black eyes turned to his. Burnt-out fires in a face with the young beard hardly full on its sharp jaw.

"Sit down, Wes, quick, and listen. Saw-

bones is no good—and why would I want to go on living anyway?"

He smiled. Kirk had never seen him smile like that, without bitterness or pain. He sat down, crouched on the body of a man who lived only two huts away from him. The blood made little red fountains between Randl's fingers.

"It's up to you, Wes. You're the only one that really knows about the Ship. You'll do better than I would, anyhow. You're a fighter. You carry it on, so the Hans can live. Promise."

Kirk nodded. He couldn't say anything. The heat was dying in Randl's eyes.

"Listen, Wes. I saw the secret way into Ship. Bend closer, and listen . . ."

Kirk bent. He didn't move for a long time. After a while Randl's voice stopped, and then the blood wasn't pumping any more, jut oozing. Randl's hands slid away, so that Kirk could see the hole the stone had made. Everything seemed to be very quiet.

Kirk sat there, holding Randl in his arms.

Presently someone came up and shook Kirk's shoulder and said, "Hey, kid, are you deaf? We been yelling for you." He stopped, and then said more gently, "Oh. Jakk got it, did he?"

Kirk laid the body carefully on the stones and got up. "Yeah."

"Kind of a pal of yours, wasn't he?"

"He wasn't very strong. He needed someone to cover him."

"Too bad." The man shook his head, and then shrugged. "Maybe it's better, at that. He was headed for trouble, that one. Kinda leading you that way, too, I heard. Always talking."

He looked at Kirk's face and shut up suddenly. He turned away and grunted over his shoulders, "The O.D.'s looking for you."

Kirk followed. The wind was cold, howling up from the outer gullies.

THE Officer of the Day was waiting at the north end of the wall. There was a ladder dropped over it now, and men were climbing up and down with bodies and sheaves of recovered spears. More were busy down below, rolling the dead Piruts and the shags down into the deep gullies for the scavenger rats and the living shags who didn't mind turning cannibal.

That ladder made Kirk think of Pa. It was the only way for a man to get into the outer gullies from the west escarpment of the colony. He shook some of the queer heaviness out of his head, touched his forehead and said:

"I'm Wes Kirk, sir. You wanted me?"

"Yes." The O.D. was also the Third Officer. Taller than Kirk, thinner, with the hair going grey on his body and exhausted eyes sunk deep under his horny overbrows. He said quietly:

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this . . ."

Kirk knew. The knowledge leaped through him. It was strange, to feel a spear-stab where there was no spear.

He said, "Pa."

The Officer nodded. He seemed very tired, and he didn't look at Kirk. He hadn't, after the first glance.

"Your father, and his two friends."

Kirk shivered. The horny lids dropped over his eyes. "I wish I'd known," he whispered. "I'd have killed more of them."

The Officer put his hands flat on the top of the wall and looked at them as if they were strange things and no part of him.

"Kirk," he said, "this is going to be hard to explain. I've never done anything as hard. The Piruts didn't kill them. They were responsible, but they didn't actually kill them."

Wes raised his head slowly. "I don't understand."

"We say them coming up the tongue of rock. The Piruts were behind them, but not far. Not far enough. One of the three, it wasn't your father, called to us to put the ladder down. We waited . . ."

A muscle began to twitch under Kirk's eye. That, too, was something that had never happened before, like the stab of pain with no spear behind it. He licked his lips and repeated hoarsely:

"I don't understand."

The Officer tightened suddenly and made one hand into a fist and beat it slowly on the wall, up and down.

"I didn't want to give the order. God knows I didn't want to! But there was nothing else to do."

A man came up over the top of the ladder. He was carrying a body over his shoulder, and breathing hard.

"Here's Kirk," he said. "Where'll I put him?"

There was a clear space off to the right. Kirk pointed to it. "Over there, Charley. I'll help."

It was hard to move. He'd never been tired like this before. He'd never been afraid like this, either. He didn't know what he was afraid of. Something in the Officer's voice.

He helped to lay his father down. He'd seen bodies before. He'd handled them, fighting on the pillbox walls. But never one he'd known so long, one he'd eaten and slept and wrestled with. The thick arm that hauled him out of bed this morning, the big hands that warmed the baby against the barrel chest. You saw it lying lax and cold, but you didn't believe it.

You saw it. You saw the spear shaft sticking out clean from the heart . . .

You saw it . . .

"That's one of our spears!" He screamed it, like a woman. "One of our own—from the front!"

"I let them get as close as I dared," said the Officer tonelessly. "I tried to find a way. But there wasn't any way but the ladder, and that was what the Piruts wanted. That's why they made them come."

Kirk's voice wasn't a voice at all. "You killed them. You killed my father."

"Three lives, against all those back on the plain. We held our fire too long as it was, hoping. The Piruts nearly broke through. Try to understand! I had to do it."

Kirk's spear made a flat clatter on the stone. He started forward. Men moved in and held him, without rancor, looking at their own feet.

"Please try to understand," whispered the Officer. "I had to do it."

The Officer, the bloody wall, the stars and the cold grey gullies all went away. There was nothing but darkness, and wind, a long way off. Kirk thought of Pa coming up under the wall, close to safety, close enough to touch it, and no way through. Pa and Frank and Russ, standing under the wall, looking up, and no way through.

Looking up, calling to the men they knew, asking for help and getting a spear through the heart.

After that, even the wind was gone, and the darkness had turned red.

THERE was a voice, a long way off. It said, "God, he's strong!" Over and over. It got louder. There were weights on his arms and legs, and he couldn't throw them off. He was pressed against something.

It was the wall. He saw that after a while. The wall where the Officer had been standing. There were six men holding him, three on each side. The Officer was gone.

Kirk relaxed. He was shivering and covered with rime from body sweat. Somebody whistled.

"Six men! Didn't know the kid had it in him."

The Officer's voice said dully, "No discipline. Better take him home."

Kirk tried to turn. The six men swung with him. Kirk said, "You better discipline me. You better kill me, because, if you don't, I'll kill you."

"I don't blame you, boy. Go and rest. You'll understand."

"I'll understand, all right." Kirk's voice was a hoarse, harsh whisper that came out by itself and wouldn't be stopped. I'll understand about Pa, and the Ship with the heat-stones in it, and the Captain's yellow daughter getting fat and warm while my sisters freeze and go hungry. I'll understand, and I'll make everybody else understand, too!"

The Officer's eyes held a quick fire. "Boy! Do you know what you're saying?"

"You bet I know!"

"That's mutiny. For God's sake, don't make things worse!"

"Worse for us, or for you?" Kirk was shouting, holding his head up in the wind. "Listen, you men! Do you know what the Officers are doing up there in the Ship they won't let us touch?"

There was an uneasy stirring among the Hans, a slipping aside of luminous black eyes. The Officer shut his jaw tight. He stepped in close to Kirk.

"Shut up," he said urgently. "Don't make me punish you, not now. You're talking rot, but it's dangerous."

Kirk's eyes were hot and not quite sane. He couldn't have stopped if he'd wanted to.

"Rot, is it? Jakk Randl knew. He saw with his own eyes and he told me while he was dying. The Captain's yellow daughter, sneaking heat-stones into . . ."

The Officer hit him on the jaw, carefully and without heat. Kirk sagged down. The Officer stepped back, looking as though he had a pain in him that he didn't want to show.

He said quietly, but so that everyone could hear him, "Discipline, for not longer than it takes to clear the rock below."

Two of the men nodded and took Kirk away down a flight of stone steps. One of the four who were left looked over the wall and spat.

"Rock's pretty near clean," he said, "but even so . . ." He shook himself like a dog. "That Jakk Randl, he was always talking."

One of the others flicked a quick look around and whispered, "Yeah. And maybe he knew what he was talking about!"

THE little stone room was cold and quiet. It was dark, too, but the sucking-plant carried its own light. Kirk lay on his back watching the cool green fire pulse on his chest and belly. It looked cool, but underneath the sprawling tentacles of it he was burning with the pain of little needles that bit and sucked.

He was spreadeagled with leather thongs. He made no sound. The sweat ran into his eyes and the blood went out of his body into the hungry plant, drop by drop.

Somebody came in, somebody too quick and light to be a fighting man. Kirk let his pupils spread. First a slim tall shape moving, a kilt of little skins swirling beneath the shimmering sinthi-mesh overall suit. Small sharp breasts and a heavy mane of hair caught back.

Then color. Yellow. Yellow like the Sun-star, from head to foot. Kirk's jaw shut and knotted.

The sucking-plant was ripped away very deftly by its upper fronds and thrown into a corner. Kirk went rigid, but he didn't make a sound. The yellow girl took a knife from her belt sheath and slashed him free with four quick strokes.

Kirk didn't move.

"Well," she said. "Aren't you going to get up?"

He could see her eyes, great black shining things. "What did you come here for?"

"They told me about you. I said I thought it was criminal to discipline you when you didn't know what you were do-

ing. So I came down to see what I could do about it."

She always came with the other women after a raid, to help the wounded. Kirk looked at her stonily.

"You must have just missed my speech."

"They told me about it. Whatever made you say things like that?"

"Aren't they true?"

"No!"

Kirk laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh. "You could have saved yourself the trouble. This isn't going to make me believe you."

The girl tossed her thick hair back impatiently. "You're acting like a child." She was no older than Kirk. "We're all terribly sorry about your father," she went on gravely, "but that doesn't give you the right . . ."

"I have the right to tell the truth."

"But you're not telling the truth!" She was down on her knees now, beside him. "I don't know what this Jakk Randl saw, or whether he saw anything, but . . ."

Kirk said slowly, "Jakk's dead. He was my friend, and he didn't lie."

"Perhaps not. But he was mistaken."

"He saw you, taking heat-stones into the Ship."

"But only a very few! We're not hoarding them. We wouldn't!"

"Then what do you use them for?"

"I can't tell you that. And it doesn't matter anyway."

Kirk laughed again. He got up, stiffly because of the raw places drawing across the front of him. His hair was gone in a sprawling pattern, eaten off by digestive acids. He said:

"You'll have to do better than that."

She was angry, now, and perhaps a little scared. He enjoyed making her angry and scared. He enjoyed the thick hot feeling of power it gave him.

She asked, "Then you won't believe, and you won't stop talking?"

"I made a promise to go on talking. And I believe in what I'm doing."

"You know what that will mean." He could hear the quiver and the breathing of her. "People may be hurt, your own people. We don't want trouble. We can't afford trouble, with the Piruts getting stronger. It'll mean you'll be punished, maybe even—killed."

That gave him a cold twinge for a moment. Then he thought of Jakk and shrugged.

"It doesn't matter," he said, and started out.

The Third Officer came in. There were five men with him, and one of them was the Captain, wearing the gun of authority.

The Captain said, "I'm sorry, Kirk. I heard a lot of what you said; too much to dare turn you loose just now. Perhaps in solitary we can talk sense into you."

Kirk stood quite still, not moving anything but his eyes. The four Hans were big and they had knives. Kirk shrugged and fell in with them. The girl walked ahead, between the Captain and the Third.

Nobody said anything. They went together up the stone steps.

THEY had taken the wounded off the wall, out of the wind. The rock below was clean of bodies, and the last of the men were coming back up the ladder.

Kirk felt queer. He wasn't like himself at all. It was as though he had fragments of ice inside his head, all jumbled. Then suddenly they fell into place, clear and frozen and unalterable, without any help from him at all.

He moved, very fast. Faster than ever before in his life, caught the Captain's gun.

His two hands thrust out, one against the Captain, the other against the Third, and sent them staggering. He charged through between them, gathering the yellow girl in to his chest firing as he went. The antique gun went dead on the third shot, and he threw it away.

A knife slashed across his shoulders, but it was short. Men began to yell. He knocked one away from the ladder head and pushed the struggling girl over and let her drop, so that she had to catch the rungs. He whirled, swinging, and sent two men sprawling back into the ones behind. Then he leaped over, dropping down the side of the ladder hand over hand.

He passed the girl, climbed onto the ladder behind her so that on one could sling stones at him, and began pulling her down by the foot. She tried kicking, but it was a long drop to the rock, and after she'd slipped a couple of times she stopped that and went on down.

Men were howling at him from above.

They started to climb onto the ladder. Kirk yelled at them, threatening to throw the girl off. They stopped. Presently Kirk felt the cold rock underfoot.

The minute he was off the ladder a man climbed over the wall and started down. Kirk yelled at him to go back, then got hold of the bottom of the ladder and pushed out. The yellow girl got out her knife again and slashed at him. She hadn't opened her mouth once.

Kirk dropped. The knife bit his shoulder, not very deep. He straightened up suddenly, swinging his open palm. It caught the girl over the ear. She fell backward away from him, rolling over on the rock. The knife flew out of her hand. Kirk heard it skitter along and then vanish over the gully edge.

He pushed hard on the ladder. It gave, and the man at the top began scrambling up again, fast. He only just made it, dangling half of him in the air, when the ladder fell. The light aluminum struts it was made of sent clashing echoes flying in the wind.

It was the only ladder they had. They'd have to bring one from one of the other pillboxes before they could climb down and get it. Kirk looked up at the men lining the wall, yelling, waving things.

Just about here Pa must have stood, looking up.

He turned and hauled the dazed girl to her feet and started off down the tongue of rock. He didn't hurry. There was no need to hurry. The young strength of the girl was pressed against him, thigh and hip and chest. It burned, in some queer way.

He watched the yellow hairs rub and tangle with his golden ones. The muscle started twitching under his eye again.

He had to cuff her twice more to keep her quiet, before they were safely off the naked rock. He got her down the length of two gullies, well out of sight of the pillbox. She was still a little groggy, and very busy keeping her footing in the pebble drifts. They started down a third cut that angled off. Then, quite suddenly, she fell.

Kirk stopped. He put out a hand to help her up, and then took it back again. He looked at his feet and surlily, "Get up."

"I can't. Where are you going?"

"I don't know. Just somewhere to think,

and plan. I've got to figure this out."

She thought about that. He could see her wide golden shoulders tremble. He wanted to touch them. After a while she said:

"Why did you take me? Why won't you let me go?"

"They'd have killed me on the rock if I hadn't had you. And when I go back . . ."

She brought her head up. "You're going back?"

He laughed at her. "Did you think you could get rid of me that easy? I told you I'd made a promise. I'm going to keep it, and you're going to help me. I can buy a lot with you."

Her pupils were little hot pinpoints. "I see. You don't care how many people you hurt, do you, as long as you can be a big man and keep your promise."

He said roughly, "Get up."

"All right." She nodded, casually. "I'll get up."

She did. She got up fast, like a rock-snake uncoiling, and she had a big stone in her right hand. She let it go, straight for his head.

Kirk jerked himself aside, but he was too late. The rock grazed him above the ear. He staggered, trying to see through a curtain of hot and flashing lights.

His earcups, working instinctively by themselves, brought him the sound of naked feet scrambling away over the pebble drifts.

Feet. And then something else . . .

Kirk yelled. He tried to shake the lights away, and yelled again.

"Stop! Look out—*shags!*"

HE heard her stop. He began to be able to see again. She was poised halfway up the head wall of the cut, her ears twitching. For a long time they stood that way, not moving, listening to the wind and the rolling pebbles and the soft padding feet of things that were hungry and hunting them.

She began to move, almost without sound, back to him. Her lips formed the word "Two," and her yellow head jerked back the way she had been going. Kirk nodded. He pointed off to the left and held up three fingers. Then he turned and started down the gully. The girl stayed close beside him. She was breathing rapidly and her pupils

swelled and shrank. They showed no fear.

Looking at them, Kirk thought of Lil. Lil was right. She did have pink lids to her eyes, and they were beautiful.

The shags followed them, two behind, three beside them beyond a thin wall of rock.

Kirk had never been in the outer gullies before. He was too young. But he'd heard Pa and the older men talk about them from the time he was old enough to crouch beside the heat-stones and listen.

Out here there were shags and scavenger rats and once in a while a rocksnake. Men of the settlement never hunted beyond the fringe. Beyond that was forbidden ground and Piruts. Nobody knew just where the Pirut colony was any more. Nobody wanted to know.

Kirk's ears were stretched, sifting the tiny shattered echoes. His spread pupils sucked in every bit of the dim grey light. His body hair was erect so that even his skin acted as a sensory organ, feeling the bodies of the shags behind them.

They were getting close.

The gully ended. Beyond it was a little space of tumbled rock with other gullies opening into it, and then a cliff built of great tilted slabs of grey stone.

Kirk pointed to the cliff and started to run, with the yellow girl beside him. Wind slashed sharp and thin across them. The echoes whispered like many tongues and Kirk fought them and heard the two shags come onto the plain behind them, running.

The other three came out of the parallel cut. They came fast, and because of the curve of the plain they were a little ahead of the two humans.

The girl said between her teeth, "We can't make it."

She was right. Kirk picked out the biggest boulder he could see and dashed for it. The leading shag was breathing on the girl's heels as he hauled her up after him.

They were safe for a while, but it didn't do them any good. In this world even shags would wait forever at the prospect of a square meal. Presently they'd start climbing and when they did it was all over. Kirk didn't even have a weapon with which to fight.

He looked down at them. Five squat thick shapes with six legs; four powerful legs with claws and two slender ones

held in against the chest, armed with sucker discs for climbing. Five pairs of black eyes watching, hungry and infinitely patient. Five tucked bellies burning under pale, shaggy hair.

He was looking at death. A strange cold terror took him. He turned his head toward the yellow girl and saw the same thing in her eyes. They looked at each other, not moving nor breathing, thinking that they were young and going to die.

He shivered. The girl's yellow body burned in the grey light. He moved. He didn't know why, only that he had to. He took her in his arms and found her lips and kissed them, roughly, with an urgent, painful hunger. She fought him a little and then lay still against him.

One of the shags started to climb. Kirk saw it across the girl's shoulder. He let her go and walked to the boulder's edge and waited until the shaggy head was level with his feet. Then he crouched and struck, in a way he had never struck before. Blood spurted across his fist. The shag roared and fell backward clumsily, shaking its head. Kirk stood up and sucked in his belly and yelled. He felt savage now, but not afraid. The echoes howled eerily.

The shag started up again, and two more came with him.

There was something queer about the echoes. They got louder and wilder. Men's voices, shouting. Kirk couldn't look, but he heard the yellow girl cry:

"Piruts!"

HE heard them coming closer, bare feet scrambling on rock. The shags came higher. He struck down, left and right. One beast lost hold with one sucker and fell into another, knocking it loose. They fell, clawing each other. The third came on. Kirk hit it. It slid its head aside and caught his wrist.

The pain blinded him. He roared and beat at it, but the grip on his wrist pulled him to his knees and almost over the edge. The brute started back down the boulder, taking Kirk with him.

The yellow girl slid suddenly in under Kirk and reached over and took hold of the shag's snout and peeled it back. The beast snuffled and squealed and chewed on Kirk's arm. The girl twisted harder. Blood

began to spill down over the shag's teeth.

It let go. Kirk began to hear slingstones whistle. The shag bellowed and took itself back down the rock, fast. The others were scattering away across the plain, driven by stones from expert slingers. Kirk and the girl crouched quietly, trembling and breathing hard.

Somebody called cheerfully, "You might as well come down now."

Kirk supposed they might as well. He climbed down, streaming blood from his torn wrist, with the girl scrambling beside him. The hackles were raised across her yellow shoulders.

Piruts. Kirk thought about Pa and Russ and Frank being driven up that tongue of naked rock. Their own people had killed them, but the Piruts put them there in the first place. And there was Jakk. Besides . . .

They were Piruts. That was enough. Kirk felt numb inside. It might have been easier if the shags had got them, after all.

The man who had called them was waiting, lounging back against a rock. He was no taller than Kirk, but he was a lot thicker and his hair was red. The bones of his face were heavy and brutal under his beard. His horny overlids were dropped so that only bright black slits showed of his eyes. He was smiling. It was a lazy, white-toothed, cheerful smile, but Kirk didn't like. It made his belly knot up.

"What," said the Pirut, "the hell are you two kids doing out here?"

"Hunting," said Kirk shortly. There were a lot of Piruts among the tumbled rocks. Four, five hands of them.

The red Pirut had stopped looking at Kirk. He was looking at the Captain's yellow daughter. "Well," he said. "Well, well!" He took himself away from the rock and came toward them. He moved slowly, as though he might be sleepy. Kirk didn't like that, either.

He said, "Let us go. We haven't anything to steal."

The Pirut chuckled. "I'm not so sure about that." He was still looking at the yellow girl. "No," he said. "I'm not sure about that at all."

He raised his hand and called the others in. Kirk knew he couldn't fight; he followed the leader.

It was a lot colder in the Pirut cave than it was back in the huts of the colony.

Everybody kept close together for warmth, crowded around the scanty heat-stones. There was a moaning draft from somewhere that kept Kirk's hair stirring, and there were babies crying. Babies that didn't sound any different from the one at home.

Kirk chewed up the last of his handful of pemmican, made of shag meat and sour berries, and was thankful for a full belly. The yellow girl crouched on the cold stone, not saying anything, her arms around her knees. The Pirut women watched her out of hostile eyes.

Samel, the red Pirut who had turned out to be some sort of an Officer, watched her too, but his eyes were not hostile.

"Close-mouthed piece, aren't you?" he said. He threw a scrap of bone at a wiry black girl huddled over the heat, and laughed. "Sada," he yelled, "get her to give you lessons, will you?"

Everybody enjoyed that. Sada called him a name and turned her back. Samel's black eyes came back to the yellow girl.

"You won't tell who you are. That means you're somebody. An Officer's daughter, likely. Maybe even the Captain's."

Some flicker in the girl's eyes must have told him he'd hit home. He jumped up and shouted, "Hey! All of you, look here! We've got somebody—we've got the Captain's daughter!"

The mob stirred and moved in. People began to shout, to curse and make animal noises of sheer hate. For a minute Kirk thought he and the girl were going to be torn apart. He shivered violently, and the hate was so strong in the air he could smell it.

Samel pulled out his sling lazily and loaded it. The sweep of his arm stopped part of the crowd, and the rest quieted down enough to hear him say:

"Hold it! Sit down, you fools! The girl's gold. We can buy things with her."

Kirk didn't get that word 'gold', but he understood the rest of it. It was what he had told her, himself.

He wished the babies would stop crying. It was hard to hate these people so much when you knew they had kids just like the one at home, wailing in the cold.

The mob relaxed sullenly. The Captain's daughter spoke suddenly, very clear

across the muttering quiet of the crowd.

"You can't buy your way into the colony with me. They'll kill me, like they did the three Hans, only this time they won't wait as long."

She was telling the truth. Samel didn't like it, and Kirk liked it even less, but she was. The muscle twitched under Kirk's eye. It was a hell of a world. You couldn't keep straight in it at all.

"All right," said Samel. "But we can buy heat with you. And maybe before we do we can get some things out of you, *free*." He moved in close to her, staring down with sultry eyes. He said huskily, "And don't think we can't, baby. And don't think we wouldn't enjoy it!"

She shivered, but her eyes didn't flinch. She told him steadily, "If it's about the Ship, you can do what you want and go to hell with it."

"I watched you up there on that rock," said Samel slowly. "Both of you. You have guts, all right. But I wonder . . ." He let his gaze slide down over her long, arrogant body. "It would be a pity to spoil that."

THE girl Sada pushed her way out from the crowd.

"You big red son of a she-shag! Look at us! Look at this lousy cave, and those boxes of heat-stones that wouldn't keep a rat-pup warm, and then think of these swine sitting up there on their plateau, fat and happy, toasting their feet! *They* drove us out here to starve and freeze. *They're* robbing the gullies of heat-stones. Listen to those kids crying! They haven't been warm since they were born, and whose fault is it? And you worry about spoiling that yellow vixen!"

Samel said pleasantly, "Shut up that screeching." He shoved the girl aside hard enough to sit her down on the stones and then knelt beside the Captain's daughter. He pulled her head back by the yellow hair and looked down into her eyes and said:

"But she's right. Pretty soon there aren't going to be any more heat-stones at all. Pretty soon we're all going to die of the cold. But you won't, you up there on the plateau. You can watch us freeze on the rocks and feel pretty smart about it. And you'll have the Ship."

He drew his breath in, sharp, as though

something hurt him. His horny lids dropped and his lips twisted like a child about to cry with pain. His hand tightened suddenly in the girl's hair, jerking her head back hard on the taut curve of her neck. He slapped her twice across the face and let her go and stood up, backing off and trembling.

"You'll have the Ship," he whispered, "for always."

Kirk got up. He felt sick, and there were red clouds across his eyes. The Captain's yellow daughter. He'd cuffed her himself. Why did this happen to him when somebody else did it? It was a hell of a world and he was lost in it. All he knew was that he wanted to hit Samel hard enough to kill him.

Instead somebody hit Kirk from behind with a sap, not very hard. He fell on his face. From a great distance he heard the girl Sada screaming:

"You and your silly Ship! What does the Ship matter when we're all going to die?"

"It matters." Samel's voice was husky and queer. "It's the beginning and the end. What it has in it belongs to us. It would make us fat and warm and strong, so that we could rule the whole world. My father died trying to reach it, and his father before him, and his father before that. The Ship matters. It's everything."

It was still in the cave. It was as though his voice had wiped it clean of sound. Kirk shivered. And in the silence the babies cried, a thin wailing lamentation to the cold.

Kirk got up on his knees. "Wait a minute," he said thickly. "Wait, you're going at this wrong. We all are. Wait, and listen to me."

SAMEL looked at him as though he'd forgotten Kirk existed. Somebody said, "Shall I fix him, Boss?" Samel started to nod, and then something in Kirk's face changed his mind.

"He put up a good fight out there. Let him talk."

Kirk got his feet under him. His head throbbed, and falling on his bandaged wrist hadn't done it any good, but at least he could see, and talk. He was scared, because what he was going to say was against everything he'd been taught since he was born, but he

had to say it. There might be a lot of things wrong with it, but basically it was right, and he knew it. He knew Jakk Randl would have said it, too.

He did not look at the Captain's yellow daughter.

"Listen," he said, loud enough so that everyone could hear him. "You're wrong about one thing. We don't have heat-stones up there on the plateau. Not the people like me, the little guys, the Hans. We starve and freeze just like you do, and our babies cry just as loud. And we sit, like you do, looking at the Ship and wondering."

He took a deep breath. They were watching him, not believing nor disbelieving. Just listening, feeling him, waiting for something he said to hit them so they'd know whether he was lying or not.

"Some of us have wondered a lot lately, about that Ship. The Officers don't let us near it. They never have, no nearer than you out here in the gullies. But somebody *did* get close to it, one man who believed in what he was doing, and he saw . . ."

He told them what Jakk had seen, thinking about Jakk's blood running red through his fingers and the fire dying in his eyes.

"I'm a Ship's man. I've been taught to hate and fear you. You killed my friend. But the Officers killed my father, without even trying to save him. And I think we're fools, we Hans and you Piruts. We're all just people, with empty stomachs and cold backs and kids that never get warm. Why should we kill each other at those walls?"

He had them. He could hear the mob suck its breath in like one man. Samel's eyes were hot enough to burn. Kirk cried out:

"It's the Officers we ought to hate! It's the Officers who hold the Ship, and hide the heat-stones in it? It's the Officers we ought to fight, not each other!"

The mob screamed out of a single throat. Out of the tail of his eye Kirk saw the yellow girl spring up. Her hands were clenched and her face was a mask of horror, of hatred and a strange pleading. She was saying something, but the mob yell drowned her words, and when it died down somebody had the girl, holding her arms and her mouth.

"All right," said Samel hoarsely, and licked his lips. "All right. What are you

going to do about it? What's your scheme?"

"I'm going to take you there, the secret way. I'm going to take you to the Ship, so that we can break the Officers and live, together."

He did not look at the Captain's yellow daughter.

THE northern escarpment of the plateau fell sheer into a deep gorge. Kirk led them into it, Samel and six hands of Pirut men and the yellow girl with a strip of hide to gag her mouth. The darkness had come down, so thick and black that pupils at their widest spread could hardly make anything from the starshine. They went slowly, but almost without sound.

Kirk watched the dead Ship, thrusting high above them against the cold stars. Presently he stopped and whispered, "Here, I think."

They stopped. Kirk went alone to the cliff wall and felt along it. His hands slipped behind a curtain of moss, into a crack barely big enough for a man's shoulder. There seemed to be a blank wall beyond, but he felt sideways, and found that Jakk had been right. There was a way.

He went back to Samel. "It's there. Come on."

"No!" Samel caught his arm. He was looking up, at the broken Ship on the cliff-top, and he was trembling. "Wait," he whispered. "I want to know this, to keep it."

Kirk followed his rapt stare. The Ship, brooding over the plain, dominant even in death. The Ship that had brought them, Officers and Hans, in some strange forgotten way from some forgotten place, and died in the bringing. The Ship, Untouchable . . .

Kirk shivered, violently. His heartbeats choked him. And then Samel was speaking, no louder than a whisper, to the night and the Ship.

"We came from the sky, following, hunting. It had power and gold in its belly, and they kept us from it. They kept us Outside, away from the Ship, and we starved and froze and waited. And now we're going in." He caught his breath between his teeth and shuddered. "And now we're going in!"

Kirk whispered, "What are 'power' and 'gold'?"

"I don't know. Something in the legend. Something men live for, and die for. We'll know soon."

"We'll know soon. Samel, remember the bargain. No killing or plundering among the Hans."

Samuel smiled, but the muscles ran hard along his jaw.

"If you're telling the truth, there won't be any reason for it. We'll let the Officers decide whether *they* die or not." Samel started forward. "The Ship," he said softly, and laughed. "*The Ship!*"

They went toward the cleft in the rock. Somebody said, "Hey, it's warm in this gorge!" Kirk realized then that he wasn't cold, and wondered why. Then he smiled bitterly. Sure. The Officers had found a vein of heat-stones, probably just under the soil where they were standing. The gorge had never been a source of the stones, the crystal rocks that looked just like the ones scattered all over except that they had a tiny light in them and burned you when you picked them up. But the Officers must be getting them from here and taking them up to the Ship, to hoard.

Most of his superstitious chill went away when he thought about that.

Inside the cleft was a shaft leading up, tool-shaped here and there, with rusty metal bars set in the rock. Kirk led the way. There was no sound made loud enough to be heard over the wind that blew across the plateau. Kirk and Samel came up out of the shaft and took the two guards from behind easily enough, and went on to the Ship.

Just for a moment, looking down across the plain, thinking about Ma Kirk and Lil and the little ones, Kirk was scared. He'd let the Piruts in. If Samel didn't keep his word, if anything . . .

But nothing would go wrong. There was no reason for it to. He was telling the truth, and once the Ship was broken into there was no quarrel between the Piruts and the Hans. They were allies against the Officers.

He remembered what he'd said to Lil, about the Captain's yellow daughter.

Samel left a guard behind and went into the Ship.

Darkness and cold and the smell of a place that hasn't been used or lived in for a long, long time, and the grit of

rusty metal under bare feet. They went very slowly, and the yellow girl whimpered in her gag.

They couldn't really be silent, slipping and blundering in blackness too thick even for their eyes, over buckled deck plates and around broken walls. Somebody heard them and called out, and the yellow girl struggled like a speared shag.

Kirk shivered and the palms of his hands were wet. He could feel the Ship like a living presence in the dark.

The somebody called again, with fear in his voice. They stumbled down a long, tilted passageway and came into a little room with a great gash in it looking out over the gorge. There was a barred door in one wall, and a man sitting in front of it over a tiny box of heat-stones.

The Captain.

He got up, a lean grey man moving with dignity. He didn't drop his spear, but he didn't try to use it, either. He didn't say anything. His eyes took them in, in the dull glow of the heat-stones—Kirk and Samel and the Piruts, and then the yellow girl, gagged and held by the arms. His eyes blazed, then. Kirk's heart jolted. It was just the way Pa might have looked at Lil. He said roughly, thinking of Pa, "Don't try anything, and you won't get hurt. I've made a pact with the Piruts. There's to be no more fighting and we take the Ship together, share and share alike. The Officers can obey, or take what's coming to them. Where are the heat-stones?"

The Captain stared at him. His face had no expression. He said, "Let my daughter go."

Samel started forward. The Captain raised his spear. "Let my daughter go!" The Piruts raised their weapons. Samel looked around the room, at the single door behind them, and grinned.

"Sure," he said. "Why not? Let her go."

They let her go. She tore off the gag and ran to her father and stood by him, glaring at the Piruts with hot black eyes. Neither one said anything.

"All right," said Samel lazily. "Now where are the stones?"

"There." The Captain pointed at the tiny box at his feet. "Those are all the heat-stones there are in the Ship."

Kirk cried, "That's a lie!"

The Captain looked at him. "Tell your friends to go and search."

"What about that door behind you?"

"There are no stones in there."

Kirk laughed. The laugh was not pleasant. He was thinking of the cold huts of the Hans and the thin babies that cried, and Jakk Randl dying on the pillbox wall, telling him what he'd seen.

"You lie. You bring the stones up out of the gorge and hide them here. Jakk Randl saw your daughter doing it."

"There was only a tiny pipe of stones in the gorge. This is almost the last of them. We used them rather than take from the community supply."

Samuel smiled his lazy smile and started toward the barred door. His eyes had a queer wild shine to them. The Captain cried out:

"Wait! Wait, and let me speak!"

Samel looked at the door and his breath made a little sob in his throat. "All right," he said hoarsely. "I can wait."

He wasn't thinking about the heat-stones so much then. He was thinking of the words of the legend, power and gold.

The Captain said quietly, "You can kill me, and go on. But I ask you not to. I ask you to believe me. There are no heat-stones in that room. The bar hasn't been lifted since the Crash. I ask you not to violate a sacred trust."

Kirk scowled and looked at the bar. It didn't look as though it had been lifted since the Crash. He began to be uneasy.

Samel spoke silkily. "Sacred trust, eh? Something that belongs to us, the Piruts. Something we've waited for, longer than anyone knows."

The Captain nodded. He seemed very tired. "I should have remembered that. The Legend grows a little hazy . . . You Piruts caused the Crash. You followed our Ship and attacked it, and in the battle your own ship was destroyed. You made land somehow in little ships carried inside the big one. After we crashed you tried again to take what is in the Ship, and we drove you out into the gullies and kept you there."

"Ever since," answered Samel huskily. "Starving and freezing."

"We've starved and frozen, too, all of us—Officers and Hans alike. But we had a sacred trust in this Ship. We've guarded

it. I think at first the Officers of that day thought that someone would come from—from wherever the Ship came from, and take them back. No one ever did. And in the struggle to live, everything has been lost. The only thing left is the knowledge that we Officers had a duty, a trust, and we've guarded this door night and day since the Crash."

"What's behind it?" asked Samel. "What's behind it?"

"Even that is lost."

Samel laughed and started forward. He caught the Captain's half-raised spear in his hands and broke it and pushed him away with the yellow girl. He took hold of the bar and lifted. Kirk and the packed mass of Piruts swayed forward like one man.

It fought him. He heaved on the bar, and sweat ran dark on his red body-hair and the veins stood like ropes on his forehead, but the rust held. Samel struggled, crying like a child.

Kirk thought: "He told the truth, the Captain did. No heat-stones, and I've let the Piruts in." He began to shiver. He started to shout—

The bar screamed like a man in torment and swung back in Samel's hands, and the door was open.

THE pale glow of the heat-stones filtered through the opening. Kirk saw a box with black marks on it—DANGER. ATOBLAST HIGH EXPLOSIVE—and above that a much smaller box made of metal, on a shelf. The black marks on the first box didn't mean anything to anybody. The father of the Captain's great-grandfather had remembered that there was such a thing as reading.

Samel reached out and took the smaller box, which was at eye level, and locked with a heavy lock, and sealed. He put it down and took the Captain's broken spear and tore the lock away.

The Captain and his yellow daughter stood like dead things, watching. Kirk's heart was pounding in his throat. The secret of the Ship, the sacred thing, the gold and power that had caused the Crash—

Samel's big red hand pulled out a flat bundle of metal sheets, marked with marks like the first box.

Treaty of Alliance between the Sover-

ign Earth and the Union of Jovian Moons, providing for Earthly colonisation and development of the said Moons, and mutual aid against Aggressor Worlds.

A single sheet fell out of the bundle. ". . . have taken the precaution of sending the treaty secretly in a ship of colonists, in care of the captain who knows nothing of its nature. It has been rumored that our mutual enemy, the Martio-Venusian Alliance, may try to intercept it, possibly with the aid of hired pirates. This would, as you know, mean war. It is my prayer that the treaty will safely . . ."

Samel stared at the bundle. He shook it, his face looking dazed, like a man just hit in the stomach. Then he threw it down and shook the box. It was empty. In a black fury he turned on the larger box and ripped the cover back, and there was nothing under it but thick transparent bottles with heavy caps, holding a tiny bit of matter in oily liquid.

There was silence in the room, thick with the breathing of stunned and angry men.

"Power," said Samel. "Power, and gold! Nothing! Nothing to make even a spear-head!"

He picked up the empty box and the bundle and hurled them out through the riven wall into the gorge. Then he caught up the larger box and threw it after.

Kirk had time to see tears running out of Samel's eyes. After that there was an agony of light and sound and motion, and then nothing.

The first thing he knew about was heat. More heat than he'd ever felt in his life, pouring over him. He opened his eyes.

Men were piled against the walls, beginning to struggle back to life. The Ship had changed position. Samel was crouched with his arms around his knees, motionless, staring at nothing. The yellow girl was helping her father out of a mound of Piruts. And it was hot.

There was light beating in through the broken wall. Kirk crawled over and peered out, his pupils contracted to little points.

The bottom of the gorge was split open, and it was burning. The father of the Captain's great-grandfather had remembered vaguely something about radioactivity and crystalline rocks that harnessed it and made heat. The father of his great-

grandfather had had great hopes for the unique form of radiation and what it could be made to do. But all his time was taken hunting meat and heat-stones, and growing moss.

The heavy heart of the little world was burning up through the crack, and for the first time, Kirk was really warm.

Kirk put his hand on Samel's shoulder. "You got heat," he said. "That's better than power and gold, whatever they are."

Samel shivered and closed his eyes. His hands went with blind speed to Kirk's throat and closed, hard. His mouth was twisted, like a child crying with pain.

KIRK clawed at his thumbs. "Don't be a fool!" he croaked. "There's heat now. Heat for everybody. The kids won't cry any more. Samel, bring your people in out of the gullies!"

"Heat," repeated Samel. "Yeah." He took his hands away slowly. "There's that, isn't there? Heat."

The Captain echoed, "Heat." He went to the broken wall and blinked at the light. "The heat-stones were almost gone. I thought we were going to die. And now. . . ." He shook his shoulders, like a man freed of a burden. "Now there's no more need to guard the Ship. Perhaps that's what we've been guarding it for, to save us in time of need."

Kirk said humbly, "I'm sorry."

"You were honest. You believed you were right. But taking my daughter. . . ."

"I deserve the sucking-plant."

"What's done is done, and it's turned out right."

People were clamoring outside the Ship. Kirk was sweating. He tasted it, and

laughed, pulling in his belly and spreading his chest.

"Heat," he said. "And no more fighting with the Piruts. Maybe there's some way we can roof the gorge and bring the heat up into the fields so the moss will grow better. And there's a lot of this world out beyond the gullies. We've never been able to explore it because of the Piruts. Samel, do you know what lies beyond you?"

Samel shook his head. "We had to eat and hunt for heat-stones, too."

"A whole world," said Kirk, "just waiting for us. Maybe we'll find other gorges like this one. Maybe places with better soil. The kids can grow up warm and fat, and have kids of their own. . . ."

He turned around and looked at the Captain's yellow daughter.

He said, "Do you still hate me?"

Her yellow shoulders twitched. She turned her back on him, and she was so beautiful he hurt with it. He went up behind her.

"I said I was sorry."

She didn't answer. A close-mouthed piece. "I lied."

Her head jerked a little and her earcups moved.

"I'm not sorry I took you with me. I'm not sorry I kissed you on the rock. Are you sorry you saved my life?"

She tossed her head. "I didn't."

"You did so. You twisted that shag's nose half off. Why?"

She turned around, hot-eyed, and slapped him. He laughed. He took her in his arms and waited till she quit clawing and struggling. Then he kissed her. Presently she kissed him back.

"You don't talk much," he said. "But who wants talk?"



PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

But to pass on. Now we hear from a young fellow whose home is in Washington, and whose jobs, desires and inclinations are somewhat overwhelming. But let him tell you in his own words. Stfans, we give you

A CONFUSED LINGUIST!

This process of writing an autobiography seems simple at first blush, but when you sit down at the typewriter, confusion rears its ugly head. You ponder interminably upon which skeletons to let out of the closet and which ones to bop on the noggin and toss back inside. However, posterity must be served, so—

The first event in my life, in common with the rest of the Feature Flashers, was being born. The occasion was on Flag Day in Kansas, twenty-six years ago. The growing up period we shall pass over lightly; the usual things occurred, measles, mumps, low marks in school, carrying a paper route for the Denver Post and one or two attempts to run away from home.

About eight or nine years ago I came to Washington, from Colorado, and here finished my high school work. Worth mentioning here is the fact that the last year I took six major subjects, full gym program, a period of typing before school in the morning and belonged to two clubs, meeting after school. Reason for the effort was that I suddenly realized I was liable to be a grandfather before I graduate.

Near the above period, I signed up with the District of Columbia National Guard. I worked up to Sergeant in the 121st Engineers, having charge of the company engineering equipment. Discharged, 1936—honorably.

Around 1935 I worked in the U. S. Capitol as an electrician's assistant for about four months. We were remodeling the old Supreme Court rooms and installing air conditioning units. One month's labor consisted of swinging an eight-pound hammer and chiseling little grooves in granite for electrical conduits. An ex-opera teacher was working with me and we made a duet out of the Anvil Chorus, while we worked.

The fattening up era came next when I worked in the Food Department of a large chain drug store. Yep! A soda jerk! But I did work up to Assistant Food Manager. It was a lot of fun—but I started putting on too much weight.

My next move was into the Government Ser-

vice. I started out on the check stand at the Library of Congress at the munificent remuneration of fifty bucks per—month! From that humble position, I worked up into the Copyright Office, L. of C., where I have been for almost six years. My job at present is indexing and cataloguing all kinds of music; unpublished, domestic and foreign, which requires a working knowledge of around ten languages.

Going to school at night I graduated from National University of Law in 1940, proud possessor of an LL. B. degree which I haven't looked at since.

A certain Editor in a certain reader's department made a crack about my procrastinating proclivities. I'll attempt to defend myself with a short outline of my present weekly schedule. Of course my job comes first, with hours from eight-thirty to five-fifteen, six days a week. Monday I study French. Wednesday comes my music lesson. (Sounds sissified, but I've always wanted to play the piano. My teacher seems a bit dubious, but I'm still plugging at it.) Friday, I study Spanish. Starting next month, Tuesday and Thursday evenings will be taken up by Foreign Service School at Georgetown University. Although I have been to the Induction Center and have been classified 4-F (bad eyes) I'm aiming at a limited service billet in Naval Intelligence.

As for appearance; I'm five feet ten inches, weigh 130, have dark brown eyes and hair and even sport a mustache. My favorite fruit is steak and french fries or a spaghetti dinner topped off with some good Chianti. Favorite relaxation is reading some of the Saint saga, or, of course, PLANET STORIES. Classical music comes in there between the lines somewhere and I also collect first editions of Don Blandings' poetry. My best friend is a Flying Officer in the RAF and my ambition is to travel to all the places he tells me about.

I've been married almost three years, the corporation consisting of Katharine, the better half, who is French and Spanish, and Betty Jeanne, my step-daughter, who is ten years old. The romance started in Law School and lasted two weeks before we were married.

No write-up of this type would be any good without a plug for my own writing abilities; oddly enough, however, I am an editor before I am an author. The Copyright Office puts out a monthly publication called the CO Service Bulletin, which goes to all of our boys in the Service. I'm the managing editor, which means that I practically write the whole damn thing. Actually I have been interested in writing since high school, when I took a few courses in writing. Since then I have been pounding at it spasmodically. In the last two years though I have really begun to get serious about the game and tried to make a go of it. Net result for spare time pounding in the last two years amounts to over two hundred thousand words, for which, to date—no checks. Most of it is in the filing cabinet, some of it, so bad even I couldn't stand it, is filed in the wastebasket. I'm still batting my brains out though, only now I'm limited to Saturday evenings and Sundays and any other time I manage to squeeze in.

Well—there's the first twenty-six years. Now I think I'll go out and drink me a toast to the next twenty-six.

Be seein' ya!

WILLIAM CONOVER.

Assignment on Venus

By CARL JACOBI

Simms had the toughest assignment of his career. He must fight his way through Venusian intrigue to deliver a sealed cylinder—a cylinder that held his dishonorable discharge from the service.

Illustration by DOOLIN



SIMMS RESTED his paddle across the thwart and let the clumsy *jagua* drift. Ahead, where the indigo swamp growth thinned, an abutment of white

metal projected from the water, its near end forming a wafer-like conning tower.

Half-way Jetty at last! Two grueling weeks through Venus' Blue Mold Swamp

were behind him. Even if he knew that this station marked the half way point to his final disgrace and humiliation, he could at least rest here, free from the incredible dangers of the marsh.

He swung the dugout to a landing, wearily stretched cramped legs and headed down the catwalk. Before him the door of the jetty opened and three men appeared in the entrance.

Earthmen!

"Halleck! Gately! Sterns!" Simms cried. "What the devil are you doing here?"

The taller of the men held the door open wider. "Come in, Simms," he said. "We've been expecting you."

Inside the spherical room the air was warm and dry. Simms unhooked his dehydration mask and surveyed the three quietly.

They weren't a lovely trio. Halleck was tall and swarthy with dark eyes and thin lips. He wore a stained rain-helmet and flexible swamp boots. Gately undoubtedly had Martian blood in his veins. And Sterns, a typical space-rat from the slums of Venus City, bore an old heat-gun scar across his face.

"I thought the Halleck Development Company was heading north," Simms said. "That's what you told the Commandante at Post One."

Halleck smiled. "We told your Commandante a lot of things that suited our purpose."

Simms stirred uneasily. "You also said you were geologists, looking for sedimentary deposits."

"Part of which is quite true." Halleck lit a cigarette deliberately, then nodded to Gately who drew from his pocket a small bag. The man jerked the draw string and permitted a dozen yellowish lumps to spill out on the table.

"*Deleon Salts*," Halleck said shortly.

Ice touched Simms' spine. He had of course seen these ochre crystals before, while on patrol duty in native Kamali villages. But in the possession of Earth men . . .

"*Deleon Salts*," Halleck said again, blowing a shaft of smoke ceilingward. "The stuff that holds the secret of rejuvenation for the Kamalis. We're going to get a lot of it, ship it back to Earth and sell it for a high price."

"But . . . but good Lord, you can't do that . . ."

"I know what you're going to say," interrupted Halleck, "that although these salts enable the Kamalis to maintain eternal life, they mean instant death to a person of Earth. Well, we've taken care of that. We've worked out a process that makes them harmless for a year."

"And after that . . .?" Simms persisted.

Halleck shrugged. "After that we'll have made our pile. We're simply selling a drug guaranteed to erase the ravages of time. It'll go like wildfire."

UP on the wall a mercury clock pulsed rhythmically, and below the floor level sounded the faint drone of the dehydrators. Motionless, Simms sat there. Like wildfire, Halleck had said. And the words were only too true. The quest for perpetual youth was eternal. Earth men still envied the two hundred year old Martians, the three hundred year old Jovians. Tell them that these *Deleon Salts* were both harmless and effective, and the results would be cataclysmic.

Every person on Earth would demand some of the crystals. And in a year . . .

"Where did you get these salts?" Simms asked.

For answer Halleck reached forward and plucked something from the Venusian Service man's belt before the latter could restrain him. Capped and sealed at both ends, it was an official mold-proof message cylinder.

"Three weeks ago," Halleck said, tapping the cylinder with his finger, "you left Post One with this tube bound for Venusian headquarters at BeTaba. You were sent in person because any radio or visiscreen communication would of course be intercepted by the Kamali Oligarchs."

"The tube contains two messages. One asks for reinforcements at the Post because of a recent epidemic of Mold Fever. The other demands your resignation because of insubordination. Insubordination—refusing to obey orders. Right, isn't it?"

A knife of bitterness cut through Simms. Yes, it was right, every word of it.

He had come here to Venus direct from the Inner-Planet Military School on Earth. At Venus City he had waited six months

before receiving his appointment to the Venusian Colonial Service. And then, without preamble, he had been sent to the most remote garrison in the Blue Swamp mold country—Post One.

A week after his arrival the Commandante had ordered him to ferret out a certain Kamali native who had rebelled against the Government, and disable him with a paralysis gun. Somehow when Simms had come face to face with the web-footed creature, his conscience had rebelled. Shooting in self-defense was one thing, but crippling in cold blood didn't seem human. He had let the Kamali go unharmed.

And a week later that same Kamali had sneaked through the impetration walls of the Post and murdered two Service men.

"The point is," Halleck continued, "we know where you stand, and we know we've got a good proposition ourselves. We've located a big *Deleon* mine near Xenthar village. That's deep mold country. All we have to do is start a little rebellion among the Kamali tribes, wait until they go on an expedition of war, then slip in and work the mine."

The man's eyes gleamed sardonically. But it was Gately who put the final offer into words.

"Now then, Simms," he said huskily, "you're getting a lousy deal from the government anyway. If you deliver that message, you'll only lose your commission. String alone with us, and we'll treat you right. What do you say?"

Simms' face masked the battle that was waging in his soul.

"I'll think it over," he said at length.

THREE hours later Simms lay in one of the wall bunks, wide awake. The jetty room was in semi-darkness, lit only by the soft glow that filtered through the ports. From the bunks opposite came the regular breathing of Halleck and Sterns. Gately sat by the table, smoking a cigarette.

The situation was quite clear to Simms now. He was a prisoner. The slightest attempt on his part to escape would result in the space-rats taking action. For it was to their interest that his message did not get through. Post One had asked for reinforcements. Those reinforcements coming back through the swamp would inter-

fere with their plans to get the rejuvenation salts.

On the other hand Halleck had spoken the truth when he said that Simms was heading straight into disaster. Delivery of that sealed message cylinder would mean his immediate dismissal from the Venusian Colonial Service.

His hands dug into the blankets. Suppose he did throw in with these three. Halleck would see that a tribal war of large proportion got under way among the Kamalis at once. That would mean every garrison in Blue Swamp would be in danger of complete annihilation. Post One with its flimsy impetration walls and its men weakened by Mold Fever would be wiped out.

All because of a few crystals. For two generations those *Deleon* Salts had been a mystery to Earthmen who colonized Venus. Chemists only knew that the Kamalis used the drug to rejuvenate their bodies and prolong life.

Once in ages past the Kamalis had been a great race with a high culture. Then through some great catastrophe their numbers had been decimated and made sterile. Gradually they had migrated into Blue Swamp, and it was here no doubt that they had developed their webbed feet and their elongated ears. Yet while the *Deleon* Salts served to rejuvenate their bodies, their minds had gradually atrophied. Only the ruling Oligarchs knew the secret of using the drug without harm to their mental powers.

Abruptly Simms tensed. Across the room Gately's head nodded in sleep. The Venusian Service man slid to his feet, stole noiselessly across to the three ports and closed them. From his pocket he took a small paralysis-fume pellet, lit it and tossed it under the table.

Back in his own bunk, he pulled on his dehydration mask and waited tensely. In sixty seconds a grey fog of vapor was swirling through the room. In sixty seconds more Gately's body had become rigid, his right arm suspended in space over the table.

Simms made sure his message-tube was in its place in his belt holster. Then he crossed unchallenged to the door. An instant later he was outside, advancing along the catwalk.

He leaped into his *jagua* and began to

paddle madly, intent only on putting distance between himself and the jetty.

He had two alternatives: to continue on to GHQ at BeTabá, or to head into forbidden mold country and warn Xenthar village. Either way his own future was doomed. But without hesitation he chose the latter.

MILE after mile Simms fought his way along hidden channels, each of which resembled its predecessor. At first he had no idea where Xenthar village lay. Then, in his mind's eye, he saw again that relief-map of the Blue Country which all Venusian Service men must commit to memory. Xenthar lay to the east in an unexplored district.

Huge blue priest trees bowed before him and sang their aeolian litanies as he passed. Living serpent-kelp clutched at his dugout and tried to prevent his passage. He moved by his watch. Overhead, at exact thirty minute intervals, successive hordes of Poleidons—*Ithiosyoria*—roared past in great blue clouds. As each migration came he ceased paddling and sat motionless. The slightest movement would have sent those flying lizard birds down to attack him.

Even his dehydration mask failed to keep out the odor of mold. Mold balls, two feet across, floated through the air like great puffs of bluish cotton. Simms kept a wary eye trained to see that none fell on the *jagua*. Had one done so, the sacrophytic spores would have taken root and over-run the boat in a matter of seconds.

On and on he went through the incessant rain. Once a huge waterskipper came, leaped over the surface of the water, its huge center eye open, its mouth a slaving slit of orange. He dug his paddle deep and pushed into the blue rip grass until the monster had passed.

And finally he saw it—a rectangular floating platform, constructed of mud and thatch, anchored by a network of vine cables.

He made a landing at a small wharf and began to stride along a matting path. Twenty feet forward, and he came face to face with a Kamali. The little man stopped short on his webbed feet, and his huge ears flapped ludicrously. With a low cry he turned and ran.

"I'm in for it now," Simms muttered. "That devil will warn the whole village."

His words were a prediction. Before he had gone fifty yards more a squad of Kamali guardsmen advanced upon him. They wore skins of *Chabla* cat and red head-dresses formed of *patani*, the Venusian swamp flower.

But Simms, though new to the Service, had had experience with interior villages before. Quietly he handed over his heat gun, let his wrists be bound, permitted himself to be escorted down the walk.

The village opened before him. Simms saw a double row of rectangular huts formed of white *carponium*. In the center a round hut marked the quarters of the Oligarch and before this structure a taller Kamali stood, wearing a headdress formed of some brownish plastic.

Simms bowed and held his message-tube in his bound hands before him in the formality expected.

"Lieutenant Simms," he said, "Sixth Venusian Colonials, bound Post One to general headquarters at BeTabá. I bring you information, oh mighty one, which it will pay you to hear."

The Oligarch's eyes contracted. He motioned Simms to continue.

"Three Earth men," the lieutenant said, "are headed for your village. They..."

His voice died off. Behind the Oligarch three familiar figures suddenly appeared in the doorway. In the foreground stood Halleck, smoking a cigarette, eyes filled with triumph. Behind him lounged Gately and Sterns. The heat-gun scar on the latter's face seemed deeper and redder than before.

"I'm afraid you're too late, Simms," Halleck said. "I've already explained to his highness that you've come to this village to steal his *Deleon* Salts. I think you know what that means."

Gately laughed harshly. "You were pretty smooth back at the Jetty," he said. "But you forgot that the dehydrators would dispose of the fumes from your paralysis-pellet in a few moments. You forgot also that we travel by hydrocar."

Simms' fists clenched. Suddenly an overpowering urge to smash Halleck's sneering face blinded all his reason. Before the Kamali guards could restrain him, he threw

himself forward and planted a driving blow into the space-rat's jaw with his two lashed fists.

But that was as far as Simms got. The Oligarch spoke a quick command then, and a rush of webbed feet sounded. Something heavy crashed down on the lieutenant's skull. He felt himself falling—into a pit of blackness.

CURIOSLY, he was aware of no lapse of time when he opened his eyes. He lay on the floor of the a low ceilinged room that was bare of furnishings.

Dizziness claimed him, and it was several minutes before he could gather sufficient strength to stand erect. He headed first for the door. It was locked, and the two circular windows were both grilled with stout metal bars. For the second time in a few hours Simms was a prisoner.

He turned, surveyed the room with eyes of growing despair. An antiquated paralysis gun hang from a peg on one wall. He tore it free and flipped open the charge chamber. But as he had expected, it was green with mold and quite useless.

The circular windows opened out on the extreme end of the village. Peering between the bars, Simms saw an endless line of Kamalis padding in from the other side of a vine screen, depositing the contents of baskets on a growing pile of black slag. A dozen Kamali squatted there, pounding pieces of the slag with little flat-nosed hammers.

This then was the *Deleon* Salt industry, the secret of which was so jealously guarded.

Abruptly Simms found his gaze focused on a larger conical building he had not noticed before. Even as he stared at its smooth windowless sides, a sound emerged from it. A low drone at first, it rapidly mounted the octaves until it became a high-pitched siren-like shriek. The sound pulsed through the walls of the hut, bludgeoned against the lieutenant's eardrums, seemed to eat into his very brain.

Higher and higher it mounted, until presently it had gone beyond the hearing range. But Simms got the impression it was still climbing into the supersonic range.

He saw then a native cross the square and head toward his hut, carrying a dish of

food. The lieutenant glanced at the old-fashioned lock on the door, and a thought struck him. Feverishly he searched his pockets, drew forth his watch. Made for use on all planets, the timepiece had a magneto-shielded case.

Quickly Simms unscrewed the back cover. The door creaked open, and the Kamali thrust the dish of food inside. But in the instant before the door clicked into position again, Simms had slipped the watch cover between the latch and the magnetic face plate.

The intervening hours until the light outside gradually faded seemed interminable. At length, however the square outside the hut was blanketed in deep gloom. Simms boldly opened the door and emerged onto the street.

WITHOUT a plan of any kind he headed instinctively toward the slag pile and the tower from which that strange vibration had come. He had reached the extreme end of the village when voices reached his ears. Quickly Simms darted into the doorway of a near hut. The men were Halleck and Gately!

"Why take chances?" Gately was saying. "We've got all the time in the world, and we might as well give those salts a longer vibration exposure. That way the Earth people who take the stuff won't feel any bad effects for maybe two years."

Halleck swore in reply. "You fool," he said. "Don't you realize we're working on counted time. The I.P. men are after me now on Mars and Jupiter. We've got to work fast. Have you convinced the Oligarch?"

Gately grunted. "Yes, the whole village sets out on an expedition of war tomorrow night."

"You told the Oligarch that neighboring tribes had been tampering with his *Deleon* mine?" There was growing satisfaction in Halleck's voice.

"Sure, I told him. Sterns told him, too, and the fool would be alive now if he'd taken precautions . . ."

The voices became inaudible then as the men passed on. Simms stood in his tracks undecidedly. Then a glimmer of flare lightning in the sodden sky illuminated that strange tower just ahead. Like a magnet

it drew him forward with its power.

Crouching low, he reached its cylindrical sides. He was groping for the entrance when his hands touched something soft and yielding. Chilled, he waited for a second lightning flare.

It came, and it revealed the body of the third space-rat, Sterns. The man was dead. His eyes were bulging and streams of blood were issuing from either ear.

Bewildered, yet careful not to disturb the body, Simms completed his circle of the tower and found the entrance. Inside he felt rather than saw a spiral staircase leading upward. With the utmost caution he began to climb.

He was breathing hard when he reached the top. A door barred his way. Simms pushed it open and stood staring on the threshold.

A bluish *radite* lamp was suspended from the ceiling. Occupying a good half of the chamber was a huge parabolic horn, its small end converging on a platform upon which a circular disc slowly revolved. In the center of the disc was a rounded heap of yellow crystals.

The left wall was taken up by a switch-board, with a series of dials staggered across a *corbite* panel. At the right wall, facing the open end of the parabolic horn, was a large wire cage.

Simms strode forward. The crystals on the revolving disc were *Deleon* Salts. But what was the meaning of this other apparatus?

He peered inside the cage and stared incredulously. *Hudrites!* The cage was filled with hundreds of the Venusian swamp insects.

And then abruptly something clicked in his brain like a puzzle piece fitting into a slot. This chamber housed the mechanism that made the rejuvenation salts adaptable to the Kamalis. The secret was vibration, a bombardment of supersonic waves, causing a basic mutation of the crystals' molecular structure.

The *Hudrites* were the Venus equivalent of the Earth cricket. But where a cricket gave off vibrations of 8,000 a second, the frequency of a *Hudrite* had never been measured. It was said to be more than two million cycles.

The vibrations from these insects were

picked up by the parabolic horn and a sensitive detector and stepped up by a cyclestat. When the sound waves struck the crystals, they responded to it at their frequency and by its vibrations gave rise to a varying voltage. The sound waves of the *Hudrites* were thereby converted into electrical vibrations and these electrical waves amplified with the aid of vacuum tubes.

The two were then united, and this bombardment of supersonic and electrical waves changed the structure of the *Deleon* crystals. No doubt the Kamali Oligarchs had discovered through long experiment just how long a vibration exposure was necessary to make the salts potent and still not effect their mental powers. The process undoubtedly took months of Venus time.

But the space-rats, Halleck and Gately, had no intention of waiting that long. They planned to expose the crystals for the shortest possible time and then sell them to unsuspecting citizens of Earth.

Another thought struck Simms. Sterns! What had killed him?

HE HAD the answer an instant later. Up on the wall a warning bell sounded and a red light flashed off and on. From a microtone speaker sounded that same deep-toned drone. Again it began to mount swiftly up the octaves, rising steadily to a high-pitched shriek preparing the way for the supersonic vibrations of the *Hudrites*. The lieutenant clapped his hands to his ears, fell to the floor in writhing agony.

Stabbing lancets of pain darted through his brain. He felt his eyes protruding; his head seemed ready to explode. With a mighty effort he managed to jerk on his dehydration mask, slide the protective ear-caps into place. Even then the sensation was only partly relieved, and he stood, heart pounding, waiting for the mad vibration to stop.

When at length it came to an end, a glance at the *Deleon* salts showed him they had colored from a light yellow to a deep orange. Tiny facets of iridescent flame now played over their surfaces.

Whatever method of utilizing the supersonic field the Kamalis used, it was a deadly one. As the body of Sterns proved, the action of those piezo-electric crystals was fatal to the unprotected human organism.

Simms moved to the control panel. He had the secret of the *Deleon* Salts now. But what good would it do him. In a short time his escape would be detected and . . .

But even as his gaze sped over the dials, a thought struck him. One of those dials must control the intervals of time between each supersonic bombardment. Another must control the frequency of the vibrations.

Boldly Simms seized a rheostat and shoved it over to its farthest marking. He found the time dial and pushed that upward too, guessing at the length of increase.

Then he was descending swiftly the spiral staircase to the ground level. He skirted the main street of the village and groped his way through inky blackness to the swamp shore.

In the gloom he made out his *jagua*. But he didn't stop here. He ran blindly a hundred yards along the matting shore until a squat beetle-like shape materialized out of the darkness. The space-rats' hydrocar.

In a half minute he had the mooring line unfastened. And then splitting the darkness about him came a shaft of white light. Simultaneously Halleck's voice yelled:

"Get him before he gets into the car!"

There was a dull report like a melon striking, and something soft and fuzzy whizzed past Simms' head to hit the water with a hollow plop. A mold gun! In the relentless light of Halleck's search lamp, the lieutenant saw the living fungus erupt into a hundred wriggling spores that germinated in a matter of seconds.

Simms leaped into the cabin and fumbled for the starter switch. Once a dozen years before he had driven a hydrocar on a pleasure cruise a short distance up the Martian Central Canal. Now his fingers touched the stud, and the motor roared into life.

But before he could press the trigger out into the swamp, he saw Halleck leap through the water and hurl himself onto the car's hood. The man broke the windscreen into a hundred glass fragments and thrust a mold gun through the aperture straight into Simms' face.

But before he could press the trigger something happened. Back in Xenthar village a mighty wailing scream pierced the

air. Like a frightened banshee the sound raced into the upper register, leaped to a grinding, ear-shattering shriek.

Halleck dropped the mold gun and clapped his hands to his ears. On shore the Kamalis uttered cries of pain and fell groveling as the sound mounted into the supersonic range and the piezo-electric crystals began their action.

With a jerk Simms swung the wheel, throwing Halleck off balance and plummeting him into the water. The hydrocar roared out into the swamp like a runaway comet.

ALL night Simms drove, wearing through aisles of man-high rip grass, circling denser groves of blue priest trees and ardaleptic ferns.

At dawn he drew up at a small island, built a fire and cooked some of the food he found packed away in a rear compartment of the hydrocar. He rested half an hour, reentered the car and drove on at a more leisurely speed.

There remained now only to go to GHQ at BeTaba, give his report and hand over his message-cylinder. And when the tube was opened, he would be through on Venus. Dismissed from the Service for insubordination. Wherever he went, that report would follow him.

His lips compressed. There was a girl waiting for him back on Earth—waiting until he had completed his hitch in the Service and could graduate to the spaceways.

Abruptly his hand, reaching to his belt, stopped, and an electric shock ran through him.

His message cylinder was gone! He must have lost it when he rested at the little island.

For a moment he sat motionless, a cold numbness sweeping over him. He must have that cylinder when he reported at BeTaba. That part of the message pertaining to reenforcements for the garrison would be given orally, of course. But the section regarding himself was different. If he failed to deliver that letter, sooner or later he would be accused of throwing it away. It would mean another case of—insubordination.

Suddenly he threw over the wheel and sent the hydrocar racing back in the direc-

tion from which it had just come.

The Great Swamp faded out of his vision now. He drove with his thoughts. And then as familiar landmarks began to rise up before him, he realized what he was doing.

It was selfishness that had driven him along the back trail. He was returning for a kind of personal satisfaction. Deliberately taking chances when the stakes were higher than himself or his own feelings.

But the island lay just ahead. It would be mad to turn back now that he had come this far. He ran the hydrocar into a little inlet, switched off the motor and climbed out.

The coals of his campfire were still glowing. Carefully he began to search the trampled grass. A fern writhed in the sodden wind, and a glint of metal caught his eye. The official tube lay where it had fallen, close to the shore.

But as Simms strode forward, a footstep sounded behind him. He stiffened and turned. An Earth man stood there on the little beach, hands resting triumphantly on hips, watching him.

"Halleck!"

In the swamp back of the space-rat lay a long *akimla* canoe, filled with Kamali tribesmen, drawn by three waterskippers, their ugly beetle-like bodies lashed with an intricate network of harness.

There was a mold gun in Halleck's hands, and he had it leveled before him.

Out of the corner of his eye the lieutenant was searching desperately for a way of escape. Above him his upraised hands touched the spreading branch of a priest tree, and he saw that its farther extremity hung within a foot of Halleck's gun hand.

Simms seized the branch and gave it a powerful downward jerk. And in the instant that the space-rat's weapon was pushed out of aim, he threw himself forward in a flying tackle.

He fought desperately, aware that he had seconds in which to act and no more. A heavy kick in the groin sent a wave of nausea surging through him. Then his hands closed about the mold gun. He tore it free and pounded a hard blow into the space-rat's jaw. Twice he stuck. Then as Halleck slumped backward, he stumbled erect and trained the weapon on the ad-

vancing Kamalis, finger tight on trigger.

"Back!" he snapped. "One move, and I fire. Get into that jitterbug chariot of yours and get going!"

TWO days later a mud-stained, mold-encrusted hydrocar swung up to the jetty at BeTabá, Venusian Colonial Headquarters on the outer edge of Blue Swamp. Two haggard Earthmen climbed out, one still gripping a Kamali mold gun, the other, his hands bound behind him.

They paced down the catwalk, entered the lock, and a moment later stood before the Post Major. Simms saluted and began a graphic description of all that had occurred.

"Post One needs help sir," he concluded. "There were twelve cases of Mold Fever when I left, and the impentration walls are badly in need of repair. The Kamalis are on the verge of an intertribal war."

The Major looked the prisoner over and nodded. All the defiance was gone from Halleck now. He stood there, lips twisted in a sullen snarl, eyes mirroring defeat.

"The I.P. men have been after this rat for a long time," the Major said. "And now, Lieutenant, I'll have your official report."

Silently Simms handed the message cylinder across the desk.

The Major opened the cylinder and glanced at the scroll inside. A moment passed in silence as he read the message.

"Lieutenant," he said at length, looking up, "how long have you been at Post One?"

"Six weeks, sir."

The Major opened a humidor and took out a Martian cheroot. "It so happens your Commandante is a very shrewd person. Lieutenant, take a look at this letter."

Slowly Simms picked up the scroll and read:

... and am sending this letter by Lieutenant Simms, a newcomer to Post One. The boy had the usual case of nerves brought about by the damnable solitude, the rain and the constant dangers here at the post, and I'm taking the usual method of curing it. Let him rest over at BeTabá for a month. Then send him back. He has the makings...

And across the desk the Major puffed his Martian cheroot and smiled.

Revenge of the Vera

By HENRY HASSE

The unarmed freighter Vera was plowing through space to meet the deadliest pirate of the Void—rocketing into battle against a fighting ship even the Space Patrol could not vanquish.

Illustration by Doolin



THE MAN SEEMED too big for the single, cushioned seat of the tiny space cruiser. But he did not remain in the seat long, and when he moved it was

with a swift surety that belied his bulk. He stepped over to the visipanel, peered into it and saw only a few pinpoints of stars. His eyes, as icy as those stars, nar-

rowed until they, too, were but pinpoints. He grasped the directional finder and swung it in eccentric parabolas across all the heavens before him. The star pinpoints swung to and fro, in and out of the visipanel . . . and then he saw it.

A vague, darker shape against the blackness, blotting out a few of the stars. Lucky! he thought, as he leaped back to the controls to change direction. Lucky to find it before the Earth Patrol got there. The news had already gone out. But he did not exult; his lips tightened into a thin hard line, and his throat tightened too, with the foreboding that crowded out all hope.

As he drew swiftly nearer, he could see the huge luxury liner helplessly drifting. He could see the black ragged hole in the hull. He could see the name on the prow, *Martian Princess*. He could see other things which he didn't want to see, which he didn't want to approach but knew he must. Numerous tiny white-faced things, staring and bloated and reflecting the leprous sunlight. . . .

The tiny cruiser clanged against the larger bulk, and her magniplates held. The man was already in space-suit. With a trembling hand he brushed back his blonde hair, then pulled down the *Crystyle*-fronted helmet. He stepped out into space.

He did not immediately board the liner. Instead he moved among the scores of drifting corpses, using a propulsion pistol. He pulled each corpse to him, stared searchingly into its face, then thrust it away with a shudder. Before he had half finished he was sick; but he felt hope surging in him again, for he had not yet found what he was looking for. Perhaps, after all . . . somehow . . . *she* had not taken this liner. . . .

He boarded it, moved along the corridors and into the staterooms. But all was a shambles. The pirates had struck as usual: sudden, ruthlessly ramming; had smashed completely through this liner like an egg-shell! He saw corpses half encased in spacesuits, but it had been a futile effort. Many of the passengers had holes blasted through them, tiny pencil-thin holes of concentrated atom-blasts at close range, mute evidence of the pirates' deadly work. The once gorgeous salons were stripped of the silks and fineries. Staterooms thoroughly looted. Even the corpses stripped of all

personal jewelry and other finery.

The grim-faced young man, the only moving and living thing aboard, noticed all this but secondarily. His heart was pounding with a newly rising hope. For in none of the staterooms had he found *her*.

He moved through the ragged gap and out the other side of the ship. More drifting corpses, hugging the hull because of the slight gravity. Methodically he moved among them, pulling them around, thrusting them away.

And then—one he did not thrust away. His face beneath the helmet stared, and became suddenly anguished. He hugged the body tightly to him. Using the pistol, he propelled his way back through the hull. He carried the girl back along the main deck, and there laid her gently down away from the others. He stared down, his face twisting helplessly, his fists clenching and unclenching.

She had been young, lovely. Her face was somehow still beautiful, as he remembered it. She had died quickly, he saw, and was glad of that. He would leave her here on the deck, for he knew the Patrol men would tow this liner back to Earth, where she would wish to be.

He looked long, so that the vision of her would remain in his mind always; then he turned and strode firmly back to his cruiser. His face as he looked out to the stars was wet beneath the glass—but there was no one there to see. There was no one there to hear—but his lips moved in a grim and terrible oath.

GEORGE MARNAY, of Tri-Planet News Service, tugged at the big guy's arm.

"Come on, now, what do you say? Let's get out of here. You've had enough of that stuff, and you're talking too much. You're heading for more trouble than you've ever seen in one night!"

The big man peered at the smaller one through a tangle of blonde hair which fell over blue and bleary eyes. Then he slammed his glass down on the bar and jerked his arm away, staggering a little. Marnay caught him and steadied him.

"Quit pushin' me, dammit," the big man said thickly. "Lemme 'lone. Go 'way, go 'way!"

"All right, mister, it's your funeral,"

Marnay shrugged. But as the other man moved away, threading unsteadily among the tables, Marnay turned and continued to watch him worriedly. And he listened even more worriedly.

The fellow's voice was thick, but it was still loud over the din in the room. He had become increasingly voluble as the potent *tsith* took effect. Obviously this was his first trip to Mars, and he didn't know the *Red Halo* was named sardonically: it was the rendezvous for the worst cut-throats of three planets!

MARNAY frowned. He hated men who became voluble under liquor, but there was something about this big, blonde guy he liked in spite of it! Something beyond the fact that he was an Earthman and an American. Now Marnay wished for the fellow's own sake that he'd shut up. But it was probably too late. Every outlaw in the place must have known by this time that the blonde Earthman was from the freighter, *Vera*—and that the *Vera* was leaving tomorrow on a sneak trip, with ten million dollars in supplies and mining equipment for the Callisto colonies!

One of the richest shipments ever to go out from Mars, and now, due to a few drinks and one bragging tongue it was a secret no longer. Marnay knew this information would soon be spreading through the criminal honeycombs of the Martian capital-city. He also knew if any of Prather's men were here—almost a certainty—the *Vera* would never get beyond the asteroids, much less to Callisto.

Through the haze of smoke he watched the motley little groups that filled the room. Tall, frail Venusians, pallid and dreamy-eyed and apparently docile, but who wouldn't hesitate to slit a throat on the slightest provocation. Leathery, heavy-lidded Martians, eternally sullen and quarrelsome. Earthmen, with that swaggering superiority and egotism which they'll probably retain to the end of time, making them the most hated men in the system. Marnay wondered how many in this room were Prather's men; probably a few of each race, but who could ever pick 'em out? Marnay had tried. That's what he was here for.

Suddenly he became tense. This was what he had feared. He saw the big Earthman stagger heavily against a table.

A mean looking Martian jumped up and shoved him violently away; the Martian's hand flew to his heat-gun, obviously awaiting an excuse to use it. But the Earthman only stared at him stupidly for a moment, swayed, and then bowed low, almost losing his balance. He mumbled a thick apology and moved away. The Martian glowered, called him something not very nice. Other Martians at the table laughed.

Marnay sighed in relief. The bartender, grinning, touched him on the elbow. "If he's a friend of yours," he said, "better get him out of here."

"He's no friend of mine," Marnay snapped. "But I think you're right, anyway." He moved across the room. Already he could see many of the spacemen listening to the words "*Vera*" and "cargo," a little too attentively.

Marnay grasped the fellow's arm firmly, said "Come on." He steered him back to the bar, easily. Then past it toward the door. But the fellow smelled the fresh air and rebelled.

"You damn fool," Marnay said, struggling with the Earthman's two hundred pounds, "I'm gonna keep you out of trouble in spite of yourself!"

"Aw-w, we're all friends here," the other said very loud, peering around happily. A couple of Venusians at the bar snickered at the naive words.

"Mister, if you only knew!" Marnay said. "Come on, now, I know a better place than this." He added: "I'll buy you a drink there."

"M-m-m . . . nope. You gotta buy *me* a drink."

"That's what I said," Marnay sighed.

"Oh-h. Then why'n't you say so?" Leaning on Marnay affectionately, he allowed himself to be steered outside.

Marnay sighed with relief and quickened his pace, pulling the other along after him. His only thought now was to get him away from the dives of this spacerfront street.

"Mister, you sure spilled the beans," Marnay muttered, more to himself than to his friend. "I know I wouldn't want to be riding the *Vera* this trip. You've endangered the life of every man aboard! Why didn't you just send Prather an engraved invitation to come help himself to that cargo?"

"I would have, but didn't know where to reach him; besides that wouldn't have been very subtle, would it now?" The fellow's speech was no longer thick. He suddenly quit leaning on Marnay, straightened up and pulled him around a corner into a dim side street. He stood there grinning in Marnay's face.

MARNAYS face was something to grin at. His mouth was hanging open as though on hinges.

"You can close it now," the other said, as he reached out and closed it for him.

"Say! You—you were just putting on an act back there!" Marnay finally managed to exclaim, inanely.

"A good one, I hope."

"No, I'm wrong." Marnay shook his head slowly. "Couldn't have been an act, I stood right there and watched you drink at least eight tsiths. My own record's four—and then they carried me out."

"You just thought you saw me drink 'em. Good trick, if you know how."

Marnay nodded. Then he looked at the man narrowly, grasped his arm and said, "Come on, let's get away from here. And listen! Whatever it is you've got up your sleeve, I want in on it! I'm George Marnay. Tri-Planet News Service."

"Bob Kennett," the other said simply, sticking out his hand. "And you are in on it. That wasn't an accident when I bumped into you there at the bar. I thought I'd like to know you, because I heard you were making a few undercover inquiries about Prather! Mind telling me just what your interest is in that pirate?"

Marnay replied, his voice suddenly gloomy. "Guess I should have said I'm formerly of Tri-Planet News. You see, it's an old, familiar story. I was on an assignment back on Earth, and I happened to uncover a huge spacer-contract graft . . . you know, millions being side-tracked into private pockets. . . ."

"Well?"

"Well," Marnay wailed, "how was I to know that one of the big-shots implicated was my boss's brother-in-law? So to shut me up I was given this assignment. Sent out here to get a line on Prather, or else. It's a cute side-track, often used; what

we newsmen call the graveyard assignment."

Kennett was interested. "Uh-huh," he nodded. "And just how much of a line have you got on Prather so far?"

"I'll give you one guess! Precisely nothing. Oh, of course I know all the stories. In the past few years the Patrol has destroyed his base of operations on Io, and again on Mercury, and twice on Ceres. But that pirate's as elusive as the last pea on the plate! Always he's one jump ahead of them, because of his spy system." Marnay shrugged hopelessly. "I suppose some of his men were in the *Halo* tonight, but how would I know 'em? I hear they drift in and out like ghosts. And that, by the way, is why I was trying to shut you up with that story you were broadcasting."

"And that," Kennett said very grimly, "is exactly what I wanted to do, broadcast it. Subtly, of course."

"Yes, I gather that, now. And I think I see your idea. You deliberately want Prather to go after the *Vera*! But—what then?"

Kennett stopped and looked straight at Marnay. When he replied his voice was suddenly ice: "What then? Then I'll accomplish what the entire Patrol has been trying for five years. I'll get that pirate."

Marnay, looking at him, saw a sudden bitter look in his eyes, and grim lines around his mouth. He knew that the other men had said what Kennett just said—but Prather was still free in the spaceways.

"Mighty big order," Marnay ventured.

"I realize that! But it's taken me three years to evolve this plan, and I think it'll work." He looked steadily at Marnay. "Are you in with me?"

"Try and keep me out!"

"Good. But I want to make it plain it's more than a newsstory we're after. This will be all or nothing, Prather's life or ours, and if my plan misses there can't be a second chance. And remember Prather's clever, he can smell a trap a light-year away. Just now, everything depends on how good my acting was tonight."

"Then I'd say you've nothing to worry about," Marnay replied, "for you sure fooled me."

Kennett nodded. "We'll see. We'll

know for sure tomorrow. Whether we go pirate-hunting or not. . . ."

THEY obtained cheap lodging on one of the dark, rear streets bordering the spaceport. Marnay slept, but not Kennett. He paced the narrow room, nervously, smoking vile Venusian cigarettes and awaiting the dawn.

The Martian dawn was breaking when there came a knock at the door. Kennett muttered, "At last!" and sprang to the door to admit someone. A Martian.

Marnay, suddenly awake, saw that he was the same mean looking Martian whom Kennett had nearly had trouble with the night before!

"V'Norgi, of the Martian Secret Police," Kennett said, presenting him.

The fellow only nodded sullenly, addressed himself to Kennett: "It would seem it is working, your plan. Shortly after you left the *Halo* last night . . . I made certain inquiries . . . learned that the news of the *Vera's* secret trip had spread into the . . . uh . . . the proper channels. . . ." The Martian seemed a little reluctant.

"All right, all right, V'Norgi," Kennett said impatiently. "What else? You know what I want to know!"

"Well . . . yes, a small, fast cruiser did leave here. About an hour after midnight . . . quite hurriedly it would seem. Now understand, Kennett, I couldn't say—"

"No, you couldn't say it was some of Prather's men. Like hell you can't! What destination? Where is Prather's new base? Mercury? Venus?"

V'Norgi started to shake his head negatively, but didn't. He looked distressed. Kennett paced up and down the room. He turned suddenly on the Martian and laughed mirthlessly.

"Oh, you don't need to answer! I know as well as you do where he is! Out on one of the Jupiter satellites somewhere—probably Io, his old base."

The Martian looked even more distressed, and Kennett nodded, satisfied. "Sure, I knew it all the time. That's why I let it be known the *Vera* was going out to Callisto." He clapped the Martian on the shoulder. "It's all right, V'Norgi, you've done me a mighty big favor as it is. Thanks, thanks a lot."

They shook hands solemnly. Kennett said, smiling a little: "Don't worry, V'Norgi; when you see me again there won't be any more Prather."

"Goodbye, Kennett. I wish you good luck." But the Martian's voice was sad, as though he thought Kennett wouldn't have it.

Kennett turned to Marnay when the Martian had gone. "The Martian Secret Police!" he said contemptuously. "They're very little above the outlaw scum of this city, themselves. I'm sure Prather buys them off, and I think V'Norgi almost hopes I won't succeed! But you see, I happened to save his life once; and whatever else you say of the Martians, you can't say they aren't conscientious toward their obligations."

"I see," Marnay nodded. "But what about that cruiser he says left here? You really think that was some of Prather's men, hurrying to tell him the *Vera's* on the way out there with a rich cargo?"

"I'm sure of it. That's the way Prather's always worked."

"But they're going where? Out around Jupiter you said. You can't be sure that's where Prather is!"

"Oho, but that's exactly what I can be sure of! You see, I've not only kept abreast of Prather's activities currently, but I've studied every available past record on him. His methods, his escapes, his shiftings. Not even the Patrol has kept tabs on him as I have. Admittedly, he's as clever as he is ruthless. But I know his system now."

"All right," Marnay conceded. "Your calculations tell you he's out around Jupiter now. Won't that be about like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack?"

"I guess so. That's why we're not going to look for him at all. He's coming right out into space after the *Vera*—I hope."

So he was coming out after the *Vera*! Marnay suddenly remembered the time when Prather had smashed through a cordon of Patrol ships, demolishing four and outrunning the rest. Marnay grimaced, but he merely said: "All right, when do we leave?"

"About noon, if I can wait that long! That cruiser that left here last night is probably very fast, and the *Vera* is just a slow old freighter; so if we give them about

twelve hours' start, and Prather acts at once, he ought to meet us somewhere just the other side of the asteroids."

"Oh," Marnay said, pretty feebly. So the *Vera* was just a slow old freighter. And with it they were going to capture the most ruthless pirate of the century! That was certainly a bright picture. Marnay began to wonder, wryly, how the hell he had ever gotten into this, and why!

AND HIS first sight of the *Vera* was nothing to inspire confidence. Shortly before noon they proceeded to the spaceport, past the Commercial locks, the Patrol locks, and on to the opposite side of the vast plaza.

There, in the farthest and most obscure lock, Marnay saw the *Vera*—long, heavy, clumsy looking. He recognized it when they were yet a hundred yards away, because the name *Vera* was emblazoned across the prow with a bold flourish that seemed somehow out of keeping with the crude ship.

"It's just occurred to me," Marnay said. "*Vera* is an unusual name for a freighter! That's a girl's name. Sounds sentimental or something."

"Does it?" Kennett said. Marnay looked at him queerly, but Kennett said nothing more.

They came nearer, and Marnay began to see the ship clearer, and it suddenly seemed to him there was something wrong with the whole thing. It was more than merely clumsy. It was grotesque.

Marnay stopped. "Say! I never saw a spacer quite like that before. It looks kind of funny, yet I can't say exactly—"

"Come on, come on," Kennett said, taking his arm and hurrying him. "Never mind that. Supplies are all aboard, all we have to do is leave."

It was quiet around the spacer. No activity. They entered the bow lock. Marnay looked down a long, empty, silent corridor.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed. "Ain't there any crew?"

Kennett said: "Yes. You and me are the crew."

"Uh huh. But we *are* taking this misshapen piece of junk clear out to Jupiter? I got that part of it right?"

"That's right. I decided it would be a

long grind all by myself. There are minor annoyances, such as having to sleep sometimes."

"Where's that ten million dollar cargo," Marnay grinned, staring around.

Kennett said very seriously: "Oh, we're carrying quite a cargo all right. And it's all for Prather if he wants it. But it's hardly the cargo he thinks he's going to get."

"The generosity of your information overwhelms me." Marnay stared around some more. Everything was stark and bare, save for the necessary controls. "Wish we had a couple of long range atom-blasts like the Patrol ships carry. Any aboard?"

"No weapons at all aboard," Kennett stated.

"How comforting! You sure make a fellow feel right at home."

"You don't sound very confident in me and the *Vera*," Kennett said. "Don't you believe we can get Prather?"

"Oh sure! I believe in fairies, and Santa Claus, and the Easter rabbit, and you and the *Vera*. Hell, don't get me wrong, Kennett. You can't shake me now, you've picked yourself a crew!"

Kennett permitted himself a smile as he moved swiftly to the controls. "Good! I knew you'd think that way."

Marnay said: "Don't flatter me, I *never* think. There's always been idiocy in my family and this proves it."

THEY'D been about twelve hours out when Kennett handed over the controls. He moved down the corridor into the middle part of the ship. Marnay heard him pounding and moving around back there for hours, but couldn't imagine what he was doing.

When he returned, Kennett pulled a lever and a heavy double door slid across, isolating the control room and part of the corridor from the rest of the ship. He volunteered no explanation, however.

On Marnay's off-duty he moved back toward those doors, experimentally. Kennett stopped him with: "Sorry, but this will have to be our quarters from now on."

Marnay nodded to himself. He was a newsman, a good one, and he knew people. He could see that Kennett was restless and impatient for action despite the fact that

he was deliberately holding the *Vera's* speed down.

But Marnay said nothing, and on the second day out, Kennett seemed a little more talkative. He said: "I guess you've been wondering why I want so much to get Prather."

Marnay shrugged, but looked at his companion shrewdly. "Wondering? No, I'm not wondering. Only last month Tri-Planet Metals boosted the reward up to a half million."

"That so? I didn't know that. But then, I haven't thought much about the reward angle." Kennett sounded as though he meant it. He went on: "You know how Prather works, I suppose."

"Ramming?" Marnay said. "Yes, I know. His ship is supposed to be built of some tough new metal he found on Mercury. I've heard that even his tubes are made of it, and are slightly expansive under pressure, giving him greater speed than any tubes yet known."

"That's probably true," Kennett said. "But the important thing is, he can ram completely through any ordinary spacer. And usually does."

Marnay nodded. "I've heard such stories."

"You've heard such stories," Kennett repeated with a startling bitterness. "But I saw one—just one. Three years ago when I was a rookie on the Earth Patrol. We received a flash that Prather had rammed and looted a passenger liner enroute from Mars to Earth. The Salvage men were sent out to rescue any possible survivors. What headquarters really meant was that they were to do the mopping up—they knew there wouldn't be any survivors. I wasn't on Salvage duty then, but I grabbed a swift Patrol boat and got out there first, anyway. . . ."

Kennett paused, and for a moment Marnay saw horror in the other's eyes. Then Kennett continued:

"You know, Marnay, when a Patrol man applies for leave after a job like that, and stays drunk for a week, nothing is thought of it. I didn't even apply for leave. I simply left duty, and I stayed drunk for a month, not a week. After which, headquarters told me I was relieved

from duty permanently. I didn't care. Not any more."

Marnay waited. He knew Kennett hadn't finished. For a single instant, the space of a memory, Kennett caught his breath in his throat; then:

"You see," he said, turning away, "the girl I loved was on that liner; and I found her. She was returning to Earth and we were to be married. Her name was Vera, too."

THE *VERA* lumbered along at about half speed. The fourth day they passed beyond the asteroid belt.

"Double duty now," Kennett pronounced grimly. "It may be only a matter of hours until Prather sights us—but I want to be sure of sighting him first!"

"Okay!" Marnay said.

From then on, one of the men stayed always by the visipanel, manipulating the dial which magnified space for a thousand mile radius. But all remained a vast swimming blackness. An occasional meteor flashed across, but no sign of any spaceship.

Once Marnay, at the controls, gave a few experimental blasts with the rocket speeds. The *Vera* jerked a little. At once Kennett was leaping to his side, spinning him around in the seat.

"What the hell!" he yelled, his face a little pale. "Do you want to—"

He didn't finish, but turned away, as the rockets purred smoothly again. Marnay smiled to himself. Had Kennett been about to say, "blow us up?" Was *that* the secret of the *Vera*?

Maybe. Marnay grew serious as he pondered on it—the rest of the ship back there which Kennett had shut off. Suppose the ship was full of *Tynyte* space-bombs? Marnay remembered the Patrol's encounters with Prather. They'd tried atom-blasts at first, but before they could take effect the tough pirate ship slid from beneath them like an eel in oil. Then they had tried *Tynyte* bombs. But the pirate ship was reputedly so fast that not one of the bombs could reach its mark with any effectiveness.

How could Kennett, then, in the plodding *Vera*, hope to succeed with *Tynyte* bombs?

A sudden fantastic thought flooded Marnay's brain—something about super speed—but he immediately dispensed with *that* idea. He was no spaceman, but he knew enough about Spacer contruction to know that Kennett had no hidden speed here in the *Vera*. No, it was something else he must have up his sleeve. . . .

Kennett went back into the middle of the ship a few more times, as though on trips of inspection, but didn't stay long.

At last Marnay said, in his impatience: "We'll be meeting up with Prather any minute now! Hadn't you better give me my orders?"

"No orders," Kennett replied with amazing calmness.

"But—damn it, man! At least I want to know what to expect!"

"I'm sorry, Marnay. Bear with me just a little longer now. If I told you any more you might become panicky at the last second and ruin everything. That absolutely mustn't happen. I *will* tell you just this much: there's never been a Spacer like this before, it's something utterly revolutionary in Spacer construction. I worked on it three years, building it almost single-handed, just for the sole moment when I'd meet up with Prather. It worked all right on a tiny model—but if the real thing doesn't work we won't be alive to know it. If only Prather would hurry!"

KENNETT turned the visipanel dial nervously, watching the swimming, empty blackness. "Maybe he hasn't swallowed the bait!" he exclaimed. "Maybe those weren't even his men that left Mars, and he doesn't know we're out here at all! Say, if that dirty V'Norgi has double-crossed me. . . ." Kennett stopped, laughed shortly. "Well, nothing we can do now. I feel it only fair to tell you, Marnay: we haven't enough fuel to take us on to Calisto, or back to Mars either. I was depending on Prather for our return fuel."

Marnay looked up with a wry grimace. "D'you know, Kennett, that's one thing I like about you. You're always telling me such comforting things at the most unexpected moments!"

But Prather showed up. It was hours later, and startlingly sudden. Kennett called from the visipanel:

"There he is, I almost missed him! I told you he's clever, he's got his ship painted solid black! Now listen, Marnay. I'm going to keep him in the panel, you stay at the controls and obey my instructions."

"Okay, but how close is he?" Marnay asked nervously.

"Dial shows a thousand miles—off the starboard bow, and he's approaching fast. Maintain your present speed."

Marnay did, but wished he was at the panel instead of Kennett.

"Click on the radio," Kennett called a minute later. "But don't answer if he sends a message through. He doesn't seem to be suspicious of anything yet, but I know he's sighted us."

Kennett continued to watch. He called: "Cut speed to one quarter. One quarter, damn it!" as Marnay fumbled with the tube control. "There, that's it, good. That'll show him we've sighted him, but he mustn't suspect we're too anxious to meet up with him."

"I'm not anxious to," Marnay replied. And then he jumped as a cold, strange voice came through the open radio.

"The *Vera*? Hello! This is Prather. You will please go into a drift while I board you. You have a cargo I should like to inspect." The voice was mocking, but at the same time anticipatory.

So the bait had worked! Marnay reached automatically for the shut-off control, but Kennett's voice stabbed at him: "Leave 'em alone! You will maintain one-quarter speed. And leave our sender off, don't answer; let him think we've got no radio at all, so he'll ram us."

So he'll ram us! That was a nice pleasant thought, Marnay thought, wiping sweat from his brow. But he obeyed Kennett's orders.

Again came Prather's voice: "Attention *Vera*! You will go into a drift immediately or take the consequences. Last warning."

Marnay had an overwhelming desire to shut off the tubes, but he didn't. He maintained their one-quarter speed. Then through the speaker the two men heard:

"They have no radio. We'll ram. It's just as well." Marnay could almost imagine Prather's shrug.

FROM THE panel Kennett said "Okay! Fine! He's still coming at us. You can lock the controls now, and come over here."

Marnay did that willingly. He peered into the panel. Then he gasped. The huge, black pirate ship was looming up terrifyingly large, filling half of space, speeding straight at them. It couldn't have been a hundred miles away, Marnay thought, and in another minute it would smash through the *Vera* like an eggshell!

Marnay waited for Kennett to make some move. He made none.

Then, in a sudden flood of horror, Marnay realized the other's purpose. Revenge, of course, he had known that! But he was going to sacrifice both their lives for it!

Kennett shook him away angrily. "Keep cool! You'll see something in a minute—get ready!"

Still they watched and waited. The detector dial registered the swiftly diminishing distance—fifty miles, twenty miles, ten. . . .

Then Kennett was on his feet, moving with swift surety to the wall, opening a small iron locker. There Marnay glimpsed a complete set of odd looking controls. Swiftly Kennett plugged in a bank of connections, electric cables. He grasped a heavy lever. He stood there, looking over at the detector dial. It showed three miles.

"All right," Kennett yelled, "hold tight! . . . Now!"

His hand came down on the lever.

FOR A moment Marnay thought the pirate ship had rammed them, or that they had exploded, or both. He and Kennett were suddenly hurtling outward . . . at terrific speed . . . their tiny compartment away from the rest of the ship!

He looked in the panel and his heart leaped. They had indeed exploded—very systematically! He saw fully a score of miniature *Veras* speeding away from each other in a perfect, ever widening circle! Each was a tiny spacer with its own motivating blast. He recalled the puzzling construction of the *Vera* as he'd first seen it, and now suddenly he understood; it had been *segmented*!

Where the huge original *Vera* had been was now only a huge steel framework, from which the score of miniature *Veras* were speeding away in their widening circle. The pirate ship was blasting violently with its forward rockets, but it was too late. It crashed into the framework, crumpling and tangling it and carrying it forward on the momentum.

"Now watch!" Kennett was yelling unnecessarily in Marnay's ear. "Space-bombs such as you never saw before—each of those *Veras*, ten tons of *Tynyte*!"

"But—they're going away . . ."

"They're equipped with magniplates! And only barely enough rocket power to hurl them away from each other. Just watch!"

The mile-wide circle of miniature *Veras* was slowing, as each of their feeble rocket-blasts ceased. And then they came heading swiftly back to their original source, the magniplates pulling them back.

As though endowed with some uncanny intelligence, they came; as though aware of the revenge entrusted to them, and the significance of their name.

The first one struck near the pirate ship's prow, letting loose its death. The ship lifted like a proud black stallion rearing in the air. The tough metal hull held—but only for a second. Another *Vera* struck. The blast hurled the ship directly into a host of others which exploded in a holocaust that ripped the black hull open like a sardine can. The rest of the *Veras* came speeding into the mass to let loose their death, complete and final.

As Marnay turned from that scene in the panel he felt sick and a little weak; Kennett was pale, but the grim little lines were gone from around his mouth and a bitter look was no longer in his eyes.

"Well, it's all over," he said with startling calmness. "I've done what I swore three years ago I'd do. I think I named my ship well."

He stared long and wistfully into space. "Yes, they're gone now—all the *Veras* are gone. Except one. *This* one's left to take us back, so we'd better start sifting through all that mess out there for enough fuel."

Slowly they drifted in, to begin the grim task.



Phantom Out of Time

By NELSON S. BOND

Graed Garroway's empire on Earth was toppling, smashed by the flaming vengeance of Dirk Morris who struck from nowhere with blinding speed and true justice. Yet such a thing could not be—for Dirk Morris was dead, slain at the brutal command of the Black Dictator.



Illustration by Rubimor

AN EERIE NOVEL OF SPACE AND TIME.

METAL GRATED upon metal, a heavy gate at the far end of the corridor swung open, and footsteps stirred dull echoes down the quiet prison-block. Neil Hardesty turned beseeching eyes to his friend and leader.

"Dirk," he begged, "for the last time . . . let us share this with you? Please!"

Vurrth, the hulking Venusian, nodded mutely, lending his support to Neil's appeal. Shaughnessey, Vurrth's earthly equal in size and strength, rumbled deep in his throat, "Yes, Dirk. We're all in this together. Let's take the punishment together . . . like men."

Dirk Morris shook his head. His voice

was firm; his gaze calm and steady.

"No. It's better *one* of us should die, than all. We set ourselves a righteous task: to rid the System of a madman and a tyrant. We pledged ourselves to fight . . . to win . . . or to die. Our first leader has already given his life that worlds may someday again breathe the air of freedom. A dozen of our comrades have paid the price of rebellion. Edwards, Johnson, Valery . . . our blood-brothers.

"Now it is my turn. But my passing does not mean we give up the fight. You, Hardesty, must take over the leadership of our little clan. When you have been freed, carry on! Find new recruits; rebuild our organization. Four against an empire is mighty odds, but if you four surrender, the liberty of all men is doomed for generations!"

Fred Meacher said hopefully, "That's right. Someone must pick up the torch. Neil, if you'd rather not, *I'll* bear the *Message*—"

"Never mind," said Hardesty. "I'm ready to take it. Well, Dirk?"

The footsteps were drawing nearer. Swiftly, coolly, but deliberately, Dirk Morris placed his lips close to Neil's ear, whispered a brief sentence. Hardesty started. His eyes first widened, then narrowed with incredulous surmise.

"Dirk!" he gasped. "But that's . . . You can't mean—"

"Quiet!" warned Brian Shaughnessey. "Here they come! The skulking rats!" He spat contemptuously on the floor as a band of armed men halted before the cell in which the quartet was imprisoned.

The foremost guardsmen parted, and before the grille appeared a man tall and powerful, dark of eye and beetling of brow; a personage whose innate ruthlessness and cruelty could not be disguised even by the ornate finery he wore. This was Graed Garroway, "Black" Garroway, tyrant of Earth, emperor of the System, Overlord—by force of arms—of the entire Solar Union.

He smiled. But there was little mirth in his smile, and no sincerity.

"Well, Morris?" he demanded.

"Well?" repeated Dirk stonily.

"Your time passes swiftly. Have you decided to tell your secret?"

"I know one thing," said Morris, "that is no secret. My time passes swiftly, yes. But so does yours. The days of your dictatorship are numbered, Garroway. Soon the cleansing flame of righteous rebellion will rise to sweep you and every evil thing you stand for from the face of creation!"

Garroway stiffened, flushing with dark anger.

"You speak boldly for a doomed man, Morris. Guards, open the cell!" He scowled. "It may amuse you to learn that I did not need your information, traitor. I gave you a final chance to offer it of your own free will. But your cherished 'secret' has already been solved."

"Solved!" That was Hardesty. "You mean—?"

"Quiet, Neil!" warned Dirk. "He's faking!"

Garroway laughed.

"**F**AKING? You shall see in a few minutes, when I put you to death in the murderous device constructed by your one-time leader, Dr. Townsend!"

"Murderous—" began Hardesty.

"Please, Neil! Then you . . . you found Dr. Townsend's chamber?" asked Dirk.

"Yes. And experimented with it, too. We know, now, its purpose. Too bad Robert Townsend did not live to receive our congratulations. So that was your secret, eh? Your late leader succeeded in perfecting a disintegration chamber?"

"Disint—" began Morris. Then he stopped abruptly. When he spoke again, his voice was defiant. "Well . . . now that you know, what are you going to do about it?"

Brian Shaughnessey stared at his friend miserably.

"Disintegrating machine!" he choked. "Nothing but a damned theoretical gadget! Is *that* the great invention we've been risking our lives for? Dirk—"

"Do about it?" laughed Garroway negligently. "Why, I'm going to turn it to my own usage, of course. And you, my unfortunate young conspirator, will attain the distinction of being the instrument's first human victim. Come, guards! We have no more time to waste."

"A moment!" interrupted Morris. "You

will keep your promise? My companions go free when I die?"

The Overlord nodded with mock graciousness.

"Graed Garroway needs compromise with no man. But I have given my word. Yes, your companions go free."

"Very well, then. I am ready."

Morris turned and gripped warmly the hand of each of his companions in turn. Then he stepped forward. Two guards flanked him. The Captain of the Guard rasped a command. The little band marched down the avenue and out of sight; silence surged in to hush the stir of footsteps. Somewhere a barrier clanged metallically.

"A disintegrating machine!" moaned Shaughnessey. "A damned disintegrating machine! Suppose we *did* have it? What good would it do us? It wasn't portable. We couldn't use it to fight Garroway's hordes. Dirk's just thrown his life away for nothing—"

"Please, Brian!" begged Hardesty.

His hands were knotted at his sides, the knuckles as white as his lips. Meacher's eyes were ghastly. Only Vurrth displayed no emotion, but the sinews of the Venusian's throat were taut cords of strain as he, with the others, waited.

Slow seconds passed on sluggish feet. Then, after a million aeons, came the dreaded signal. From afar sounded the thin, persistent hum of pulsing current; the strong lights of the prison-block dimmed briefly . . . glowed . . . dimmed again . . . and glowed. . . .

BRIAN SHAUGHNESSEY, strong fighting man that he was, raised a hand to his eyes. Neil Hardesty's breath broke in a shaken murmur. Meacher whimpered, and Vurrth's massive fists tensed at his thighs.

Again a door opened . . . again footsteps approached the prisoners. There was a look of gloating malice on Garroway's swarthy face. He said, "Open the cell, guards. Let them out now."

Hardesty whispered, "It . . . it is over?"

"It is over. Your friend has vanished . . . disappeared into whatever hell awaits rebels." The Overlord smiled. "It was a most interesting exhibition . . . most. Through the glazed pane we saw him stand-

ing, panic-stricken, frozen with terror. Then the current was turned on. Before our eyes, he vanished as a mist—"

"I don't believe it!" growled Shaughnessey. "Morris was afraid of nothing; man, beast, nor devil—"

"And . . . and *we*?" broke in Fred Meacher fearfully.

"Go free," said Black Garroway, "as I promised. But have a care! If ever I hear a word of complaint or suspicion raised against any of you again, you will share his fate. It is only through my graciousness you live."

"We understand," said Neil evenly. "Come, friends."

He led the way from the cell as a guard unlocked the door. When the four had almost reached the end of the prison corridor, Garroway called after them.

"Oh . . . one thing more! I almost forgot to thank you, Meacher!"

Shaughnessey said, "Huh?" What's that? Why? What's he got to thank *you* for, Fred?"

Meacher's pale eyes rolled, suddenly panicked.

"Me? I . . . I don't know what he's talking about—"

Black Garroway's heavy laughter filled the hall.

"What? Oh, come now, Meacher! Of course you do. I appreciate the information you gave me on Morris. The reward I promised you will be waiting at the State Hall tomorrow. A thousand credits, wasn't it? Well, come and claim it—" He chuckled stridently—"if you can."

Before the quick suspicion rising in the eyes of the comrades he had betrayed, Meacher quailed. He tugged free of Shaughnessey's hand and scampered to the protection of Garroway's guard. His voice bleated shrill remonstrance.

"Sire . . . you should not have told them! I served you faithfully and well . . . wormed my way into their inner council! Were it not for me you would never have known—"

Black Garroway avoided the informer's frenzied clawing. His voice was hard, mocking, contemptuous.

"Fool! You brought me no information worth hearing! Through my own efforts I discovered Townsend's instrument and

solved its secret. You are a dolt, a stupid bungler! I need no such aides."

"But I told you Morris held the Secret —"

"Bah! There is no longer a secret to be held."

"But there is, Sire! Before he died, Morris told it to—"

Hardesty interrupted coldly, "Am I to understand, Garroway, that this man is no longer under your protection?"

Garroway shrugged.

"I have washed my hands of him," he said carelessly. "Come, guards!"

He turned away as Meacher screamed, vainly struggled to escape the vengeful trio closing in on him.

"Take him, Vurrth!" ordered Hardesty succinctly.

The great Venusian's hands closed briefly around the traitor's throat, stifling his garbled cries. With revealing ease he lifted the Earthman, held him dangling like a sack of meal in midair, and looked at Hardesty for orders.

"Put him down," commanded Neil. "We will settle our differences elsewhere."

Vurrth grunted, and obediently loosed his grip. The body of Fred Meacher slumped to the floor awkwardly . . . and lay still. Brian Shaughnessey bent over the crumpled figure. He glared up angrily at his comrade.

"Confound you, Vurrth! He's dead!"

Vurrth grinned slowly.

"Sor-ree," he said. "Maybe hold too tight?"

One of the guards, glancing back, muttered a word to his captain who, in turn, passed the message to the Overlord. A thin smile touched Garroway's lips, but he did not turn his head. The incident was, his attitude intimated as he led his entourage from the hall, a matter in which he took no concern whatsoever. . . .

II

AS AT HIS captors' bidding he stepped into the great metal chamber which was the late Dr. Townsend's creation, two singular emotions filled Dirk Morris' mind. One of these was thankfulness, the second . . . curiosity.

Fear was strangely absent. Perhaps that was because for many months Dirk and those with whom he conspired for the overthrow of Black Garroway's tyrannical rule had lived under a Damoclean sword. Death, long a silent guest at their every gathering, was a host whose imminence aroused no dread.

Dirk was thankful that he had been able to buy, with his own life, the freedom of his companions. Why the Emperor had been willing to strike this bargain, Dirk did not exactly understand; possibly because the Overlord held his enemies in contempt, now their leader was being removed; more likely because Garroway still held a lurking fear of those who plotted against him, and was freeing them only that his hireling spies might watch their movements.

But even that, thought Morris gratefully, was better than that all should die, and the Movement end. Hardesty now knew the Secret, and while one remained alive to work on that knowledge, hope endured.

The second commingling emotion, curiosity, concerned the chamber into which, at this very moment, he was stepping. A "disintegration chamber" Garroway had called it, vowing his scientists had learned its method of operation. But in this, Dirk knew with positive assurance, the Overlord was mistaken. Utterly mistaken. Yet, if it were not a disintegration machine, then what—?

There was no time for further thought. The door was closed; through the thick pane Morris saw Garroway nod, saw a soldier close the switch on the instrument's control-board.

For an instant the thin hum of current filled Dirk's ears; a terrific impact of pure electrical energy pierced his every nerve and fiber with flaming hammers of agony. He felt his knees buckle beneath him, was vainly aware that his mouth opened to cry aloud noiselessly.

A strange, twisting vibration wrenched and tore him; the solid walls about him seemed to melt and writhe at angles the eyes ached to follow. All this he saw as in the throes of wild delirium. Then, unable to longer bear the fearful pain, every sinew of his being tensed for an intolerable instant . . . then darkness, blessed darkness, rushed in to claim Dirk Morris.

He sank, weak and senseless, into its enfolding arms.

SILENCE.

Silence and darkness.

Then, out of the silence, sound. Out of the infinite darkness, light. Light, and warmth, and comfort.

Dirk Morris opened his eyes.

He opened his eyes . . . then closed them again, shaking his head to rid his fancy of its weird hallucination. Beside him a voice spoke soft, rippling syllables that held no meaning. Another voice replied; a masculine voice, equally soft, but elderly and grave.

The possessor of the first voice, pressed a cup to Morris' lips. An unknown liquor tingled Dirk's palate and swept the lethargy from his veins. He stirred and lifted himself to one elbow, stared about him incredulously.

"Where — ?" he began — "where on earth—?" Then he stopped, seeing the sky above him, the ground supporting him, those who were his Samaritans. A poignant regret seized him. He whispered, "Not on Earth. Then the ancient religions were true? There is an afterlife . . . a Heaven peopled with angels."

The girl kneeling beside him laughed, her voice like the music of rill waters. She turned to her elder companion, said in strange, accented English, "See, I was right, father! He is from over There. I recognized the garments; severe and ugly. Not at all like *ours*—"

She touched the flowing hem of her own brief, silken kirtle with fingers equally soft and white. Both she and the gray-beard were dressed in clothing of classic simplicity. No stiff military harness like that worn by earthlings of Dirk's era, but something resembling the *chiton* of ancient Greece.

Dirk said wonderingly, "You . . . you're human!"

"But, of course, stranger."

"This . . . this isn't Earth, though. Nor any planet of the System!"

Dirk gestured toward the landscape, smooth and gaily gardened, stretching from horizon to horizon with no ornament save the natural adornments of Nature. Here were no grim and ugly buildings towering to the skies, blocking the sun's warm rays

from view; no shining mansions flanked by filthy hovels; none of the cheek-and-jowl splendor and squalor of the world whence he had come. Here was only gentle, untrammelled beauty in a quiet, pastoral existence.

No planet of the Solar System was so organized, Dirk knew. But were a second, convincing proof needed, he had but to glance at the sky. There shone not the lone, familiar Sun of Earth . . . but *two* suns! A binary system. One golden-yellow like Sol, the other a bluish-white globe of radiance.

"No," answered the elderly man, "this is neither the Earth from which you came nor any planet of its system. This is the planet Nadron, satellite of the twin suns, Kraagol and Thuumion, in the fourth galactic level."

Triumph was a bursting bomb in Morris' heart.

"Then it was a success, after all!" he cried. "Then Townsend was right! If only he had lived to see this day! A success . . . and all because Garroway's scientists, playing with an instrument they did not understand, succeeded where we had failed for years!"

"But . . . but your planet is unfamiliar to me; I do not know your suns by the names you have given them. Your system lies just where in relation to the galactic center? How many miles . . . or light years . . . are we from my native Earth?"

The old man looked at him oddly for a moment, then:

"We are *no* miles from your Earth, my friend," he announced quietly, "and the distance may be measured in *seconds* . . . not light-years."

Dirk stared, bewilderment in his eyes.

"I . . . I'm afraid I don't understand, sir. I hope you will forgive me. Perhaps you are joking—?"

"It is no jest, my boy, but the simple truth. Earth and Nadron are . . . but, stay! Let me prove my point otherwise. Has it not occurred to you to wonder that we, the people of a foreign world, know your language?"

Dirk said wonderingly, "Why . . . why, that's right; you do! But how—?"

"Because," explained the elder, "we have listened to it being spoken for many, many years. Over our visors we have both heard

and watched you on your neighboring world."

"Neighboring world?"

"How came you here?" asked the old man. "What means of propulsion brought you hither?"

That, at least, Dirk knew. He answered eagerly.

"I came here through the medium of the greatest discovery ever made by man. The *teleport*, a machine invented by Robert Townsend. A perfect solution to the long puzzling problem of material transport through Space. It disassembles the atoms of any body placed in its transmitting chamber, and reconstructs that body at a destination selected by a setting of its dials.

"Through circumstances not of my own choosing, I was a subject of that machine. I was forced into the transmitter by . . . well, it does not matter whom . . . and my body broadcast to this spot. Though I do not yet, sir, understand just where I am, or exactly how I reached here—"

The old man shook his head regretfully.

"I am sorry, my boy, to tell you the machine did not work as was planned. Its theory was sound; in one respect it performed as expected. It *did* disassemble your atomic components, did reconstruct your body elsewhere. But it was to no far bourne your journey carried you.

"Your body still stands in exactly the spot it stood before the machine operated!"

FOR a long, uncomprehending moment Dirk Morris gaped at his informant. At last his bedazement found words.

"Oh, now, surely you can't expect me to believe—"

"No," interrupted the graybeard gently, "not without visual evidence. Rima, my dear—?"

He turned to the girl, who nodded and from the folds of her garment produced a shimmering crystal object; a mirror of some sort, or a lens. This she handed to Dirk.

"If you will look through this—?" she suggested.

Morris lifted the crystal to his eyes wonderingly . . . then almost dropped it in his excitement!

Beneath his feet still lay the lush greenward of an alien world, but through the curious crystal he gazed upon no panorama

of soft, rolling hills and pleasant valleys. Before him lay the image of a scene he had but recently quitted: the execution dock of Graed Garroway's prison!

A few feet to his right stood the metal chamber into which he had been thrust, the supposed "disintegration cell." Through the viewpane of this the Overlord was peering, a grim smirk of satisfaction on his lips. As Dirk watched, Garroway turned and gestured to the guardsman whose hand had depressed the activating switch. Dirk heard no words, but could easily read the movement of the Emperor's lips.

"Enough! It is done!"

With an instinct born of illogic, Dirk reached forth as if to grip the throat of the murderous Garroway. In doing so, the crystal left his eyes. Instantly the scene vanished. He looked once more upon distance-purpled hills softly limned in the splendor of two suns.

The girl laughed softly.

"Confusing at first, isn't it? But you'll soon—"

"Please!" begged Dirk hoarsely. "I must see—" He placed the mirrorlike object once more to his eyes, saw Graed Garroway lead the way from the execution chamber. Awkwardly, uncertainly, Morris took a step forward . . . another. Though he knew his feet trod the soil of the planet Nadron, to his eyes it seemed he glided forward across the floor of the prison.

The door swung to behind Garroway and his followers, and involuntarily Dirk flinched . . . then grunted reproof at his own needless gesture. So far as he was concerned, that heavy metal barrier did not exist. For the briefest fraction of an instant his vision was blotted by jet darkness, then he stood outside the door, looking down the corridor.

He hastened forward, stumbling, as feet that appeared to be traversing smooth floors actually trod uneven soil, and paused at last, an invisible presence at the tableau next enacted. He witnessed his friends' release from the cell, read the movement of Hardesty's dry lips as Neil whispered, *"It . . . it is over?"* He saw Garroway's boastful warning, Brian's hot denial, then watched—first with dazed incomprehension, then with fierce understanding—the betrayal, panic and execution of Fred Meacher.

WHEN Meacher's corpse lay on the floor at . . . or so it seemed . . . his very feet, and the comrades left the hallway, he would again have followed them. But at that moment he landed with a solid bump against something hard, and with a start he looked from the crystal to find a tree before him. More than a hundred yards away waited those who had befriended him. He retraced his steps slowly to their company.

"Now you understand and believe, my boy?" the kindly alien asked.

"I believe," said Dirk simply. "But, sir—"

"My name, man of Earth, is Slador. On this world, I am known as the Ptan Slador, which is to say 'teacher.' This is my daughter, Rima."

"I am called Morris. Dirk Morris. I also—" Dirk spoke bitterly—"have a number, as have all Earthmen of this unhappy century. Yes, Ptan Slador, I believe, but even yet I do not understand. I stand in one world, but looking through your crystal I see into another: my own. Why is this?"

"Because, Dirk Morris, our two worlds lie adjacent."

"Adjacent? You mean in Space?"

"I mean in Space-Time. Look, my young friend . . . your Earth science knows of the atom?"

"But of course. It is the building-block of matter. The smallest indivisible unit—"

"Exactly. Yet even this minute fleck of matter, the building-block of worlds, so small that it cannot be observed under man's strongest microscopes, is composed of ninety-nine per cent *empty space*!

"Or, let me say, rather . . . what *appears* to be such to the men of all universes. Actually, there is no emptiness in the atom. It is composed of solid matter, but the individual zeron of this single entity are all vibrating at a different frequency in the Greater Universe which includes *all* of Space and Time.

"Consequently, you on Earth, existing at one rate of vibration, see an entire universe vibrating at a period which matches your own. We of Nadron live under another vibration. Our solidity, our world, our universe . . . these are all part of the 'emptiness' of your world, just as your

existence forms a part of the emptiness of our atom. Do you see?"

"Vaguely," said Dirk humbly. "Only vaguely. We, the young men of my era, are not an educated people, Ptan Slador. There was a time in Earth's history when all men were free to study where and as they wished, read what they willed. It is not so now. Only the highborn are permitted to own books, or borrow them from the Overlord's crypts; only those designated by the Emperor are taught to read and write. The rest of us, hungry for a crust of knowledge, must gather in hidden places to learn our letters from instructors who risk their lives to teach us."

"You mean," cried the girl, "one man has dared grasp so much power? So much evil power?"

Slador nodded gravely.

"Yes, my dear. I have long believed some such situation existed on our neighbor world. From scenes I have witnessed through the visor, snatches of whispered conversation, I guessed such might be the case. It is a sorry plight for a once proud world. Drowned in a sea of ignorance, sunken in a slough of misery and despair, mankind is beaten helpless—"

Dirk laughed gratingly.

"Pardon me, sir. Not beaten. Not helpless. We are ignorant, yes . . . but not yet have all of us abandoned hope of striking off our shackles.

"We have a secret organization, fostered by the late Dr. Townsend, led until recently by myself, now headed by the bravest of my former comrades: Neil Hardesty. The members of this clan are pledged to one purpose . . . the overthrow of Graed Garroway, tyrant of the Solar System.

"Our greatest hope for success lay in Dr. Townsend's invention, the *teleport*. It is quite impossible to muster an armed band on any of the planets under Garroway's thumb. His spies are everywhere. Even—" Dirk finished bitterly—"among our own supposed comrades.

"Therefore we had planned to transport our bodies to some extra-Solar world, there gird ourselves for a last fight against Garroway's minions. That was our dream. But now—"

He paused, shaking his head sorrowfully. That dream was now ended. Dr. Town-

send's secret weapon was not what had been hoped. Instead—

THEN, even as he despaired, understanding drove home with blinding force. The weapon was *not* a failure! It was a success . . . but in another way than had been planned. He cried aloud: "But, yes! I've been blind! This way is just as good . . . perhaps better!"

"What way, Dirk Morris?" asked the girl.

"There is no need to seek a far planet of a far sun! We planned that solely because we did not know anything about the existence of your world, your universe.

"Nadron shall be our rallying spot! It is the ideal spot wherein to gather our forces. Close to Earth . . . seconds, not light-years, from the foe we would crush—"

"A moment, Earthman!" interrupted Slador. "You mean to use our world as the breeding-place for conflict on yours? Is that your thought?"

"But of course. What better place?"

The Ptan shook his head gravely.

"I am sorry, my son. But I fear that is impossible. The Council would never permit it."

"Council?"

"Our* government. Here we have a World Council, made up of the oldest and wisest amongst us. Many, many centuries ago the question was raised as to whether we of Nadron should establish and maintain intercourse between our neighboring planets.

"After a lengthy period of observation and study, it was decided we should not. It was the Council's judgment—" Here Slador flushed with thin apology—"that Earth is in too primitive a stage of development for such a union.

"Wherever and whenever we watched affairs unfolding, we saw war, strife, bickering and discontent. We saw poverty and hunger . . . perils unknown in our own quiet civilization. We heard the roar of gunfire and the bombastic mouthings of warlords. We found, in short, no culture worthy of inclusion in our own placid existence.

"At that time was the Law laid down . . . that we of Nadron should not embroil our-

selves in Earth's affairs until such time as a civilized Earth should be able to meet us on a plane of equal amity.

"Therefore—" sighed the Ptan—"despite my private sympathy with your cause, I am compelled to warn you that you may not use Nadron as host for your gathering forces. Though a peaceful world, we have means of enforcing this edict. I am sorry, but you must develop other plans."

Dirk stared at the speaker strickenly, realizing the logic of all Slador had said, but feeling, nevertheless, sick despair that Earth's past madresses should now so destroy the only chance of present salvation. He turned to the girl, who returned his gaze with a helpless little shrug of sympathy.

He wet his lips, said hoarsely, "But . . . but if you do not help us, Earth is doomed to tyranny for countless decades to come. You cannot refuse us your aid—"

Slador said smoothly, surprisingly, "I have not said I would not aid you. I have merely forbidden your forces the soil of Nadron. But there are . . . other ways of helping. Ways not under the ban of our Council's sage decision."

Hope surged in Morris like a welling tide.

"There are?" he cried. "What ways, Ptan Slador?"

"Have you forgotten," asked Slador, "the strangeness of your own existence here? Or is it that you do not yet see how this can be bent to use? Listen, my son—"

He spoke, and Dirk Morris listened with ever growing interest.

III

CORPORAL Ned Tandred, Precinct Collector of Taxes in the Ninth Ward, Thirty-Fourth district of Greater Globe City, did not like his job.

As he wheeled his unicar through the twilight shaded streets of the city, hemmed by a rush of bustling traffic, he thought regretfully of those from whom he had this day forced payment of tithes—tribute—they could ill afford.

An old man . . . an even older widow . . . the husband of an invalid wife and father of three small children . . . a young man unable, now new taxes had been

exacted, to marry the girl who had been waiting for him seven long years . . . these were just a few of the humble lives the Emperor's recent edict had driven to newer, deeper, sloughs of despair. And he, Corporal Tandred, had been the unwilling instrument through which Garroway had dipped once again into the pockets of his subjects.

"Subjects!" grunted Corporal Tandred. "Not subjects . . . slaves! That's what we are, all of us. Myself included!" He tugged savagely at the handle of his unicar, careening the tiny one-wheeled vehicle perilously to the curb of the avenue as a gigantic, gray-green armored tanker of the Imperial Army roared belligerently up the center of the street, hogging the road and scattering traffic before it. "Miserable serfs, all of us! If I thought there were half a chance of getting away with it, I'd skip this filthy uniform and—"

He stopped suddenly, a strange sensation coming over him. The sensation of somehow being watched . . . listened to.

He peered cautiously over his shoulder. No . . . no one in the car but himself. The communications unit was dull; no chance his rebellious grumbling had been overhead by a keen-eared Headquarters clerk.

Corporal Tandred breathed a sigh of relief. Nerves. Just plain nerves . . . that was all that bothered him. That was the result of living under constant surveillance, inescapable oppression. You got the feeling of never being free.

"This cursed money!" he grumbled again. "If I could get away with it, I'd throw it in the Captain's face! In the Overlord's face! Thieving—"

Once more he stopped in midsentence, his lips a wide and fearful O of bewilderment. This time he had made no mistake! There was someone near him. A voice spoke in his ear.

"*Make no such foolish gesture, Corporal!*"

Corporal Tandred recovered control of his car with a sudden effort. He depressed its decelerating button, drew it to the curb, and stared wildly about him.

"W—who said that?" he demanded hoarsely. "Where are you?"

"*Who speaks,*" said the quiet, insistent voice, "*does not matter. Nor the spot from*

whence I speak. The important thing is that you hear and obey my words. Make not the error of hurling the tribute money in anyone's face. Deliver it to your superior officer—but see that you get a signed receipt for it. Do you understand?"

"No!" said Corporal Tandred weakly. "I hear a voice speaking, but see no one. I don't understand—"

"*It is not necessary that you understand. Just obey. Get a signed receipt for that money. That is all!*"

"Wait!" cried Corporal Tandred. "Wait a minute—!" He was talking to himself. Even as he spoke, he sensed that. The strange, semi-electrical feeling of a nearby presence was gone.

FOR a moment he sat stock-still, trying to sooth his ruffled nerves. His effort was not altogether successful; he started the unicar with a jerk, and sped down the avenue at a rate of speed forbidden by civic ordinance. A uniformed attendant frowned disapproval as he screeled to a stop in front of the Revenue Office, but Corporal Tandred paid him no heed. He hurried straightway to the central office, there deposited his collections before his captain.

The captain nodded abstractedly, then, his attention drawn by some oddness in the subaltern's appearance, raised a questioning eyebrow.

"What is it, Tandred? Anything wrong?"

"N-no, sir," said the corporal uncertainly.

"Someone make a complaint? That it?"

"Well, sir, there *were* several complaints. Citizens find these new taxes hard to swallow, sir; very hard."

The captain laughed derisively.

"Sheep! Let them suffer. It is no concern of ours. The Overlord has a militia to maintain. Well . . . that is all."

He waved a hand in dismissal. Corporal Tandred said hesitantly, "Yes, sir. But the . . . the receipt, sir?"

"Receipt? For what?"

"For the money, sir. Regulations, sir."

"Oh, yes." The captain grinned caustically. "Don't you trust me, Corporal? You never asked for a receipt before that I can remember."

"N-no, sir. I mean . . . of course I trust

you, sir. I just thought that . . . that this being a new tax—"

"Very well; very well!" The captain scribbled, tore a receipt from his pad, and handed it to the underling. "You may go now, Corporal."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Corporal Tandred left hurriedly, still uncertain *why* he had obeyed the instructions of the mysterious voice, still uncomprehending as to *why* he should have asked for a receipt, but with a strong conviction he had done the wise thing.

He was right! Five minutes later the money vanished mysteriously from the captain's desk. Or so, at any rate, in stern, judicial court the captain swore repeatedly to an even colder superior. In vain the captain protested his innocence and tried to shift the blame to Corporal Tandred's shoulders. The Corporal was in the clear, triumphantly acquitted through possession of a signed receipt for the missing money.

In the bleak gray of the following dawn, the captain was shot for theft and conspiracy against the State. But the money was not found among his effects. . . .

BRIAN SHAUGHNESSEY, crouched in the concealment of a flowering hedge, heard the footsteps of the guard pass within scant inches of his head. He counted slowly to himself.

" . . . eight . . . nine . . . ten . . . "

Noiselessly he gathered himself for the silent dash. Watchful waiting had taught him that ten seconds after marching past this bush, the guard turned briefly down a side lane from which the roadway was invisible. A hurried run, a swift and silent dash, would take him to the doorway of the supply warehouse.

He crouched, tensed, listened . . . then ran. For a big man he made little noise. He had reached his objective with seconds to spare before the guard, returning from the bypath, glanced up and down the main avenue, found all clear, and resumed his rounds.

Shaughnessey grinned, slipped into the shadow of the doorway, and fumbled at his belt. He withdrew a metal ovoid, prepared to draw the pin that set its mechanism into operation . . . then stopped! His fingers faltered, and he whirled, eyes darting

anxiously. For from the darkness, a voice had spoken.

"No, Brian!"

Brian Shaughnessey shook himself like a great, shaggy dog. He was a strong man, a man of great courage. But he was also a superstitious man. Awe dawned now in his eyes. "This is it, then," he whispered to himself. "I'm not long for this world. It . . . it's *him*, come to meet me. Well—" He shrugged—"if that's the way it must be, I might as well finish this job—"

And again he reached for the pin. But this time the sense of unseen presence was so strong that Brian Shaughnessey could almost feel the grip of ghostly fingers tingling on his wrist. And the voice was louder, clearer.

"No, Brian! Not here!"

"Morris!" cried Shaughnessey starkly, unbelievably. "Dirk Morris!"

"Hush, you idiot!" warned the voice. "You'll bring the guard down upon us!"

"Us?" repeated Brian, baffled.

"Don't toss that grenade here. You're too close to the munitions bins. Here . . . let me have it!"

Shaughnessey, stricken with a near-paralysis of awe, felt a curious vibration tingle through his fingers as from his slackened grip the explosive ovoid slipped . . . and vanished! He stared about him wildly, gasped, "The grenade! Where did it go? Dirk—"

"Not now!" whispered the urgent voice.

"Go to Neil. Tell him to gather the Group at the regular place tonight. I will come to you. Now, get out of here. Quickly!"

"B-but I don't understand—" gulped Brian.

"Quickly!" insisted the voice.

Shaughnessey nodded. He did not in the least understand what manner of mystery here confronted him. But he was a faithful servant of the Group. It was enough for him that he had heard Dirk Morris' voice, and that voice issued orders. Without another word he turned and slipped across the pathway to the covert of the hedge. Using it as a shelter, he fled the vicinity of the warehouse.

It was well he did so. Less than two minutes later, a terrific blast hurled him headlong to the ground as a bolt of man-made lightning seared the munitions dump wherein was stored the bulk of Graed Gar-

roway's military supplies for this area. A livid stalk of greasy smoke, flame-laced, mushroomed to the skies, and the terrain for miles around was shaken as by a temblor.

When the ensuing fire was finally brought under control, there remained but charred and twisted girders in that gaping pit which once had been a fortress. . . .

LENORE GARROWAY hummed softly to herself as she sat before the gorgeous, full-length mirror of her dressing-room table. She was happy . . . and that was not altogether commonplace, because for an Emperor's daughter, surrounded by ease and every comfort, dwelling in the lap of luxuries few others even dared dream of, Lenore Garroway was not often happy.

But she was now, because she was with her gems. No pleasure in the seven worlds compared, in the Princess Lenore's mind, with that of fondling her precious stones, rare and perfect specimens gathered from the farflung corners of the System at the cost of no one dared guess how many lives.

Before and about her in bounteous array lay a ransom of glittering baubles. Chalcedony and sardonyx . . . diamond and ruby . . . the rare green *pharonyx* delved from the sea-bottoms of Venus, the even rarer ice-amethyst of Uranus . . . *wisstrix* from giant Jupiter and the faceted *koleidon* of tiny Eros . . . these were her playthings.

So she sat, allowing the glittering motes to sift through her soft, white fingers, raising this matched set of rings to her ears, that exquisite lavalier to her equally exquisite throat, humming softly to herself as she sat at her dressing table, watching the graceful movements of her perfect body in the full-length rock-quartz mirror.

A soft tap pulsed through the room, and the Princess Lenore turned, the flicker of a frown marring the perfection of her brow.

"Well, Marta?" she demanded.

Her maid-in-waiting entered fearfully. She was old and ugly. The Princess would not have about her any who were not; her radiance must be at all times like that of a true jewel amidst paste. Even the ladies of the court were required to dress down their own lesser beauty when gathered for state occasions.

"Well, Marta?" repeated the princess.

"Your pardon, Highness," breathed the old woman. "A delegation from the women of the city—"

"What do they want?"

"It is something about . . . taxes, Highness. They say they cannot afford—"

"Taxes!" The princess' eyes clouded. "Why must they fret me with their miserable woes? I know nothing of taxes. Bid them see my father."

Marta cringed humbly.

"They have tried to, Highness, but without success. That is why they have come here. To beg your intercession—"

"I cannot see them," said Lenore. "Tell them to go away. I am busy."

"But, Highness—"

"Away, I said!" The princess' voice was silken-soft no longer; it flamed with sudden petulance. "I am too busy to hear their petty grievances. Send them away! And you, too!"

With abrupt, feline violence she snatched a handful of baubles from the table before her, hurled them at the aged servant. Marta stood like a withered Danae beneath the rich rain, whined, "Yes, Highness," and disappeared. The princess shut intrusion from her mind as the door closed. She turned once more to her playthings, picked up and fondled a pendant of intricately interwoven sapphire and *tolumnis*. Its green-and-scarlet flame burned cold against the smooth satin of her breast. She hummed softly to herself, happy. . . .

It was then the voice spoke.

The voice was a man's voice. Its masculine deepness was like the rasp of grating steel in the languid femininity of this room.

"Send them away, eh, Princess? Very well. As you have judged, so shall it also be judged against you!"

The Princess Lenore whirled to the doorway, startled white hands leaping to her throat. Her gray-green eyes were wide with shock . . . and horror. They widened even more as they found . . . no one!

"Wh-where are you?" she gasped. "Who dares enter the boudoir of the Princess Lenore?"

She heard no sound of footsteps, but the voice drew nearer with each word.

"I so dare, Princess."

"And . . . and who are you?"

"My name does not matter. But you may call me Conscience, if you must give me a name. For I am the Conscience of an empire."

The voice was beside Lenore now. She spun swiftly, her hands seeking emptiness about her.

"It is a trick! Someone will die for this! Leave! Leave this instant, or I call the guard!"

The voice of "Conscience" laughed.

"Call the guard if you will, Princess. I will have gone ere they arrive . . . and these with me!"

This time the sound came from behind her. Again the girl whirled, this time to see a stupefying sight. As if imbued with eerie lapidary life, the jewels were rising from her dressing-table in great handfuls. Leaping clots of rich iridescence climbed into thin air . . . and vanished!

UP till now the princess had been overwhelmed with shock; now she was struck to the quick with another emotion. She screamed aloud and darted forward in defense of her precious gems.

"Stop! They are mine! How dare you—?"

Her questing hands touched the disappearing jewels, and for an instant a strange, electrical tingling coursed her veins. Then the warmth of a human hand struck down her clawing fingers; the Voice cried sternly, "*Let be, woman! These go to those who need them more than you!*" Then with a quick change of tone, "*Stand still, you little hell-cat—*"

The Princess Lenore had flung herself forward upon the invisible thief, was groping with maddened fingers at a face, at eyes she could not see. Her hands touched flesh . . . her ears caught the swift sibilance of an indrawn breath. In all her life, never had Lenore been in such close contact with a man. Strong arms gripped her shoulders, shook her fiercely, an angry voice grated, "*You greedy little fool! Are these all you live for, then? Cold stones? No wonder your heart is an icy barren, without sympathy or compassion. Don't you know what it means to hunger and be without bread, to want and be without hope, to love and be without love? In all your life, have you known only the icy caress of gems? Not this—?*"

And harshly, stunningly, the cries of the Princess Lenore were stifled by the crush of male lips upon her own. For an instant the world spun dizzily beneath her; it seemed a burning brand raced through her veins, crying a tocsin. A vast, engulfing weakness shook the princess; she fell back, trembling and shaken.

Then anger, fierce and bitter, cleared her senses. She opened her eyes . . . and found herself viewing an incredible sight: herself bent to the embrace of a tall, dark-haired man clad in the rough habiliments of the working class. A young man whose jacket pockets bulged with the jewels that had disappeared . . . a young man whose eyes were covered with a pair of strangely shaped spectacles. . . .

With a start, she realized she was seeing her formerly invisible guest in the rock-quartz mirror. At her gasp, the stranger spun, saw his reflection in the glass. With an oath he loosed her, seized a heavy stool, and hurled it at the glass. Its smoothness shattered into a thousand gleaming splinters . . . and once again she saw no one.

"*Vixen!*" grated the voice. For a few more seconds, jewels continued to leap upward into what the Princess Lenore now knew were hidden pockets, while she stood helplessly by. Then—she never could explain just *why*, but by some curious *absence* of sensation she knew—the boudoir was deserted save for herself.

The Princess Lenore stared long and wonderingly at what had been a mirror, the most perfect example of Plutonian rock-quartz crystal ever moulded. Then one soft hand lifted strangely to lips which still tingled . . . and something like a smile, a thoughtful smile, touched those lips.

Then, at long last, the Princess Lenore called the guard.

IV

NEIL HARDESTY peered anxiously at the chronometer on his wrist. He said, "Almost midnight. Brian, are you sure it was—?"

"Positive!" said Brian Shaughnessey stubbornly. "It was Dirk Morris, Neil. You've got to believe me. I know how it sounds. Crazy. But it was him."

"You didn't *see* him," reminded Hardesty gently. "You were under great stress. It

might have been an hallucination, you know."

"Was that explosion," demanded Shaughnessey, "imagination? It blew the warehouse plumb from here to Tophet. If I'd been within five hundred yards, I'd have been blown to a bunch of rags. It was him, Neil. I'd know his voice any time, any place."

Vurrth said thoughtfully, "But Dirk dead, no?"

"That's what we *thought*," said Brian doggedly. "But he ain't dead. Either he's still alive, or his ghost—" A strange look swept his features. He stopped, glanced at the new leader of the group. "Neil, could it have been a—"

"I don't know," confessed Hardesty. "I honestly do not know. We'll just have to wait and see, Brian. But if he's coming here tonight, he'd better come soon. It's almost midnight. After the curfew, we won't be allowed to move on the streets."

"Particularly," interjected a new member of the Group, "now. The Overlord's guards are watching the streets like a pack of hounds since the theft of the Princess' jewels."

Hardesty said staunchly, "They can't blame that on us. We were all at work when it happened. Still . . . I'd like to know who did it. I'd like to know what became of them, too. Disappeared into thin air, the Princess claimed—"

"*The jewels*," said a familiar voice, "*have been distributed where they will do the most good. Their wealth has been converted into food to fill the bellies of those who hunger.*"

All occupants of the refuge spun as one, seeking in vain the speaker. Neil Hardesty cried:

"Dirk! Then Brian was right! But . . . where are you?"

The voice from nowhere chuckled.

"That is what Garroway would like to know. I am beside you, Neil. Reach out your hand."

Hardesty did so. Briefly he felt a strange, warm tingling . . . then his hand met and gripped the hand of Morris. Tears sprang to the Group leader's eyes. He choked, "Dirk! Thank the gods you have returned! We thought you were—"

He hesitated over the word. Morris supplied it.

"Dead? I am, Neil . . . so far as you are concerned."

All members of the listening party stirred uneasily. Vurrth grunted, and Brian Shaughnessey husked, "You see? I guessed it. A ghost—"

"That's right," laughed Morris in most unwraithlike tones. "A ghost. A galactic ghost . . . free to roam the System without hindrance or bar. Fleshless at will . . . but with a body if I so desire."

"You . . . you mean," choked Neil, "you can make yourself visible if you wish?"

"Not visible to your eyes, no. But I can render myself solid when it is necessary to do so. It was thus—" Morris laughed—"I stole the tax-collector's gleanings and the Princess Lenore's jewels. Thus, too, I helped Brian destroy the munitions dump."

"I'm afraid," said Hardesty humbly, "I'm afraid I do not understand, Dirk. You are fleshless . . . yet you can make your body solid. You are alive, yet you call yourself 'dead so far as we are concerned.' What does it mean?"

"I'm not sure," answered Morris, "that I understand it myself, completely. But here is the explanation as it was told me—"

HE told them, then, of that which had followed his "execution" in the teleport. Of his meeting with Ptan Slador and Rima, and that which had transpired between them. To a group such as this, untutored and unlettered, it was vain to speak in technical language; he told his story as simply as possible.

"—thus," he concluded, "though the laws of Nadron forbid our using that adjacent world as a gathering-spot for our forces, the Ptan Slador and his fellows are sympathetic to our cause. They, therefore, instructed me in the use of their visor, as well as in the employment of certain strange faculties developed in me by my passage through the teleport.

"I am, you see, no longer simply a man of Earth, but a creature of two worlds. Through the machination of the teleport, my atomic vibration was altered to that of Nadron's galactic universe. But in the greater continuum of Space-Time, there remains a life-path which is mine, and typically mine.

"To this ineradicable life-path I am al-

ways free to return. Could you see me, you would note that I wear two odd bits of apparel. One, a pair of visor-spectacles secured to my eyes; the second, a form-belt which enables me to give my invisible body substance when such is needed.

"To reach any given spot on Earth, I have but to go to its matching spot on Nadron, then turn the stud upon the space-belt. This sends a magnetic flux through my body, diverting it from Nadron's vibration to that of Earth . . . and placing me on my home planet. But as for visibility—" He shook his head sadly—"that I can never be again . . . to you. There are limits to the diversion of matter. My only real existence now is upon Nadron; my visits to Earth can be made only as a tangible and vengeful wrath."

"Then we can never see you again, Dirk?"

"Not on Earth. On Nadron, perhaps. The Plan Slador has promised that when we have rid Earth of its tyrant, intercourse may be opened between our two worlds. Not before, though." Dirk pondered briefly. "There is one other way," he said. "A way which I did not know of myself until a few hours ago. But I shall not mention it, even to you. It was an accident which happened in the Princess' boudoir. I must ask the Plan about it when next I see him. Meanwhile—"

"Yes?" said Brian eagerly. "What do we do, Dirk?"

"You," ordered Morris sternly, "get out of sight and lay low! All of you! The incidents which have occurred today are but a mild beginning to what is to come. There is about to burst loose a reign of terror such as Gared Garroway in the depth of his infancy never dreamed possible . . . and I am its originator!

"When this begins, Garroway's first logical move will be to herd all known living members of the Group together for questioning. You know the manner of his interrogation. You must be spared the pleasures of his rack and brand.

"So . . . hide! Go where you can, as swiftly as you can, and forget you have heard from me. But spread the word to all freedom-loving men that the time approaches when Earth and the solar system will rid itself of Garroway's shackles. You can do this from concealment?"

"We can," said Hardesty eagerly. "We can and will, Dirk. The hearts of millions are with us. If you will but tell us when and where to strike."

"You will be told from time to time. When word does not come, you will know to strike where a weakness has been driven in the enemy's defenses."

The voice of Dirk Morris was not pleasant now. It rang with the bitter hardness of forged steel.

"I will strike Garroway hard, and often, and everywhere! Where least he expects attack, there will I strike him. His armies will be robbed of leaders, stores, strongholds. I will make Earth a boiling hell for him. And when Earth becomes too hot a cauldron for his tasting, to the far planets of the System I will pursue him inexorably. Thus I vow by the bond of comradeship we have pledged!"

Hardesty asked, "Far planets, Dirk? You can leave Nadron, then?"

"Yes. There is no time for further explanation now, though. You must get into hiding immediately. For tonight begins the vengeance we have so long waited. Until happier days, then, my friends—"

The voice dimmed with the final words. An electric tenseness left the air, and somehow the assembled listeners knew their visitor had gone. Neil Hardesty shook himself.

"Goodbye, Dirk, and . . . good luck!"

Then, to his companions, "Well . . . that's all. Now we know what to expect. Come on . . . let's get going! There's a lot of work ahead of us, as well as Morris."

ALREADY back on the fair soil of Nadron, Dirk Morris had retraced his wanderings to the home of the Plan Slador. He approached its "doorway," marveling again—as he had when first the Plan revealed the entrance to his domicile—at the ease with which the portal merged itself into the surrounding landscape.

Homes on Nadron, Dirk had learned, were underground! That was why the eye beheld nothing but the beauties of nature when the horizon was scanned. The functions of living were carried on in cleverly constructed subterranean dwelling-places, leaving the entire surface of the planet a playground for the pastoral race.

The Plan was awaiting his return, eager

curiosity in his eyes. He looked up as Morris entered.

"Well, my friend?" he asked.

Dirk smiled grimly.

"Very!" he replied. "It has been a day Graed Garroway will long remember . . . if I give him a chance to do so."

"Your plans were successful?"

"Perfectly. I assisted one of my erstwhile comrades in the destruction of a vital munitions storehouse, robbed a tax collector of his monies and the Emperor's own daughter of her jewels, and distributed these where they were needed most . . . amongst the poverty-ridden families of the capital." Morris chuckled. "There will be more surprised faces tomorrow when those poor devils wake to find themselves richer by a king's ransom than when they sought their pallets."

"Still," said Slador thoughtfully, "you have really accomplished little. It would take a thousand men as many years to redistribute the tribute Garroway's army has exacted from the people of your homeland—"

"That is true. But this is only a beginning; a few, minor incidents created to strike fear and awe into Garroway's hirelings. Later, I will strike at more vital spots. And as for men . . . there will be not thousands, but millions, to rally when Garroway's force begins to weaken."

Slador nodded.

"Yes, that I believe. It is the history of mankind. Ever there have been millions to arise when oppression grows unbearable."

A remembered question stirred in Dirk's mind; something which had vaguely puzzled him in his previous conversations with the Nadronian. He asked, "How is it, Ptan Slador, you know so much about the history of Earthmen? And how, even more strangely, does it come about that you of Nadron and we of Earth are identical in physical structure? Man's space-vessels have flamed to the farthestmost planets of our sun, but nowhere else was ever found a life-form similar to that on our own Earth."

"The Venusians resemble us, but are taller by many feet, heavier, slower of wit. The Plutonians again look like us . . . save for the fact that their skins are green. Yet you, not only removed from

our Solar Galaxy, but from our very ken of knowledge, might be a brother of my own."

The Ptan smiled slowly.

"And so, in fact, I am, Dirk Morris."

"What?"

"A brother many times and many centuries removed. Tell me . . . have you never heard of the land of Aztlan?"

"Azt—?" Dirk pondered, shook his head.

"No. I'm afraid I have not, Slador. Where was it . . . or is it?"

"It was," answered the older man, "an island in the ocean you Earthmen now call the 'Atlantic.' The very ocean takes its name from our once-great nation—"

"Aztlan!" ejaculated Morris. "Atlantis! Of course! Now I remember. It is a myth . . . a fable . . . of an island which sank beneath the waves countless centuries ago! But surely, sir, you don't mean—?"

"I MEAN," Slador assured him gravely, "that legend is no fable, but veritable truth. Yes, my son, there *was* such an island . . . and we of Nadron were once the rulers of that island, and of your world."

"Its ancientness is not measured in centuries, but in millennia. How long we descendants of the Atlanteans have lived on Nadron, our archives do not tell. Those who fled hither from the holocaust that deluged our former home could not bring with them the impedimenta of a cultured civilization. We had to fight our way upward from semi-barbarism to our present state of living . . . and even yet we have not regained all the lost lore of Aztlan."

Dirk said humbly, "Great must have been the wisdom of your forebears to be able to transfer themselves from a sinking island to this place. I understand, now, your interest in Earth. It is more than just sympathy for us . . . it is a natural love for a land which once was yours."

"Yes," said the Ptan. "A land which once we ruled, and now have lost forever. But enough of this, my son. You were telling me of your adventures—?"

"Yes," said Dirk, remembering. "There was one thing happened which I do not understand. In the boudoir of the Princess Lenore, Ptan Slador, I was *visible* for a few seconds! Why was that?"

Slador stared at him in astonishment.

"Visible! Impossible!"

"That's what I thought. But it is true, sir. I saw my own image in the Princess' mirror—"

"Mirror! Ah!" exclaimed the Ptan. "Now I begin to understand. This mirror . . . it was not plain, silvered glass? It was, perhaps, quartz?"

"Possibly," admitted Dirk. "I would not know about such things, sir."

"Undoubtedly," mused his advisor, "it *must* have been a rock-quartz mirror. That is the only Earthly substance of dual isotopic form. Its converse refractions hold and trap not only the normal vibrations of your system, but harmonic vibrations as well. Surely your scientists know this. Many hundreds of years ago, I know they experimented with the use of quartz substances in both light and sound transmission.

"But we are not so interested now in causes as in results. Do you think the Princess saw you in this mirror?"

"I . . . I am afraid so," confessed Dirk. "It was her astonishment that attracted my gaze to the glass. Of course, I shattered the mirror instantly. But too late to keep her from seeing—"

"If, of course," interrupted a cool voice, "she was not as bemused as yourself."

"Eh?" Dirk spun, flushing in swift embarrassment as his eyes met those of Slador's daughter. Rima's lips were lifted in a light smile which, oddly, was not altogether of amusement. "Oh, you mean . . . then, you . . . you saw?"

"You do let business interfere with pleasure, do you, Dirk Morris?" laughed the girl. "Yes, I am sorry, but I must confess to having been an innocent witness to your . . . momentary digression. It was inexcusable of me, I know, but I was so interested in your endeavors that I turned on the visor to follow your adventures, and—"

"Rima," blurted Dirk, "you must believe me . . . it was nothing. I mean, the Princess means nothing to me. I—"

He stopped, his embarrassment heightening with his color as he realized how any attempt at explanation merely made an already awkward situation worse. It suddenly mattered to him terribly that Rima should have watched that impulsive

episode between himself and the Emperor's daughter. He had no right, he knew, to think of Rima as other than a girl who had befriended him on an alien world . . . but somehow he already did. At first sight of her, a new meaning had entered into his life.

It did not soothe him that Rima turned away his explanation with a laughing shrug.

"Oh, but do not misunderstand me, Dirk Morris. It does not concern *me* in the least how you amuse yourself in your lighter moments. And your other exploits were, I must acknowledge, thrilling to watch . . . in a somewhat different way."

Dirk said miserably, "Please! It was an impulse . . . one I regretted immediately. The Princess Lenore means nothing to me . . . nothing. I shall never lay eyes on her again in my life. . . ."

V

IN that one statement, Morris was mistaken. He made it in all good faith, but its truth was a matter over which he was not to have full control.

Two weeks passed. Two weeks filled with excitement and adventure. Two weeks during which Dirk Morris made good his pledge to the assembled brothers of the Group, now safely in hiding.

During that fortnight the Galactic Ghost . . . as soon he became known to the whispering citizenry of Earth . . . struck again, again, and yet again at the wide-flung forces of Black Garroway. Some of these blows were of a minor nature: the theft of hoarded gold, and the subsequent reappearance, as if by magic, of that gold where starving folk could lay eager hands on it; the mysterious disappearance of the Emperor's armored unicar scant moments before Garroway was to make an impressive "personal appearance" before the populace of the capital city; the inexplicable vanishment of a secret formula wherewith the Overlord's military experts hoped to subdue the gallant little guerrilla army which still held a salient against Garroway's might on the planetoid Iris.

Other occurrences were more violent . . . the kind that not even a ruthlessly controlled press can keep from public knowledge. The shocking demolition of the Overlord's strongest Asiatic fortress

at Chuen-tzwan, keypoint from which his troops dominated all of what had once been Southern China. At six-fifteen in an evening, according to testimony given by the commanding officer at the subsequent investigation, from out of nowhere had appeared a placard, advising the entire garrison to withdraw immediately from the fortress, advising its component members, moreover, to rebel against Garroway. This ultimatum had teeth in it. Midnight was set as the deadline for obedience.

When at midnight the garrison was still abristle with an aroused and suspicious force of armed men, from a dozen key points had broken out instantaneous fires. "Only a member of the Imperial High Command," testified the wretched officer, "could have known where to set those fires. Each was at a vitally strategic place: near a munitions bin, a water supply depot, or a warehouse of inflammables. We were helpless. In an hour the entire fortress was doomed. I was lucky to save a tenth of my men."

He was not so fortunate in facing Garroway's wrath. The ex-commanding officer was put to death, along with every other ranking officer of the destroyed battalion.

This summary execution seemed bootless, though, when a day or so later a similar flame destroyed the spaceport wherein was cradled one quarter of the Emperor's fleet. It was revealed by those who escaped this debacle that it had been impossible to salvage a single one of the spacecraft. "They were not merely attacked with fire from without," one official avowed. "Each vessel was found to have been tampered with by someone of the crew. The hypos were smashed as if with sledges, vital running parts were broken or stolen. We were helpless!"

Helpless . . . helpless . . . helpless! There were excuses Garroway heard often, far too often, during the next weeks. It was a word he learned to hate fiercely, because it was so true. In quick succession he saw fall his outpost in Lower Africa, the well-fortified city of Buenos Aires, the central armaments depot on Lake Huron. And each time the apologies were the same. "We saw no one . . . heard no one . . . until it was too late."

MEANWHILE, trouble had reared its head challengingly in the capital city itself. Here, as elsewhere, a frightened populace began by asking, "Why?" and rapidly changed its query to the more daring, "Why not?"

Rumor, despite Garroway's every attempt to still it, ran like quicksilver through the city. If the press was silent on a new disaster, a common man or woman walking the streets might hear at his elbow a mysterious Voice asking, "*Did you know that last night the fortress at Toulon fell? The city is freed of the Emperor's rule; already the people have declared their independence, set up a provisional government. You can do the same. The hour is near!*"

Or a child, playing with his little companions on the streets, would suddenly stop and look about him strangely, listen as to an unseen speaker . . . then run home to his parents with the inexplicable words of a Voice: "*Yesterday the Territory of Mexico threw off the Overlord's bonds. In a short while you may do the same. Prepare!*"

Or an unwimpled nun, praying in the sanctuary of a forbidden cloister—Black Garroway had long since outlawed the Church—might hear the vengeful, whispered tones of an unecclasiastic visitant: "*On Timor the Cross is worshipped openly since the Overlord's force has been broken. Here it will soon be the same. Spread the word!*"

Thus the message was passed from person to person, and through a citizenry for decades apathetic to its own plight a new sense of hope and courage pulsed. Garroway's warriors sought in vain the refuge of the Group, upon the heads of whose members the Emperor had long since placed a tremendous price. But any common man who felt the urge to add his contribution to the rising tide of revolt could find that refuge with ease . . . for at his work, or by his side, or in the heart of a crowd would be a Voice to tell him its location.

So grew revolt like a tropic vine, reaching out new tentacles with every rising dawn, developing new strength with every failure of Garroway's heretofore supposedly invulnerable war machine, gathering new converts with every fresh disaster.

And the mute whisperings of fearful people began to thrum with a new and heady tone . . . the spirit of daring, the renaissance of the flame of liberty. The voice of the people . . . which is the will of God.

Graed Garroway heard the bruitings of this voice, and was afraid.

GRAED GARROWAY, whose boast had ever been he feared no man, heard the slow, insistent voice of revolt closing in about him . . . and was afraid.

For the first time in his brutal career he had met an enemy he could not crush with ruthless blows, destroy by force, obliterate with a flick of the hand. His armies had fallen twice . . . thrice . . . a dozen times before a phantom, a will-o'-the-wisp that struck and fled, leaving terror, awe, and desolation in its wake.

He was baffled and confused, was Black Garroway. A terror was upon him that he could neither escape nor admit, for his confession of this fear to his commanders might be the last thing needed to send them, too, fleeing from his banner.

There was but one living soul to whom he dared admit this fear. That was his own flesh and blood, the Princess Lenore. Yet even to her he would not make an open avowal. His admission came in the form of blustering attack.

"Cowards!" he stormed, pacing the floor of his daughter's boudoir. "Snivelling cowards . . . the lot of them! All this nonsense about a Voice . . . a ghost that destroys strong forts . . . a phantom that passes unscathed through flame . . . *pah!* It's lies, lies . . . nothing but lies!"

Princess Lenore studied her father lazily. She was not of the type easily stirred to fear. Under other circumstances, born the daughter of a lesser man than Black Garroway, Lenore Garroway might have made a name for herself in the world. As an adventuress . . . a fighting-woman . . . a daring woman.

She drawled, half amusedly, "Lies? Are you so sure of that, my father?"

"Sure?" snorted Graed Garroway. "Of course, I'm sure! There is no such thing as invisibility! My scientists have proven that time and time again in laboratories. The fabled 'magic cloak' of invisibility is both hypothetically and actually impossible.

Where matter exists, there must be either reflection, refraction, or occultation—"

The Princess yawned.

"I do not understand these high-sounding words," she said, "nor need I. Because, you see, I have met the Galactic Ghost myself."

"Nonsense!" fumed her parent. "It was an hallucination you suffered. Sympathetic reaction set up by nervousness. The medical examiner testified—"

"Sometimes," interrupted the girl coldly, "you allow your ultrascientific viewpoint to warp your better judgment, my father. You talk nonsense! Could a nervous reaction account for the theft of my jewels, or the shattering of my mirror?"

"I am not denying," protested Black Garroway stiffly, "that the . . . the Ghost visited you. Possibly he hypnotized you into believing him invisible. As for your broken mirror, that might have happened in a dozen ways—"

"The mirror was broken," said Lenore, "by the Ghost! Because I saw him reflected in it!"

"Furthermore, it is ridiculous to assume—" The Emperor stopped abruptly, his brow congealing—"Eh? What did you say? You saw—"

"I tried to tell you," purred the girl, "at the time. But you were too concerned with the loss of my gems to listen to me. I told you I saw the Galactic Ghost. He was a tall, dark-haired young man—"

"Ridiculous!" puffed Garroway. "More hypnosis!"

"—with crisp, curling hair," continued the Princess reminiscently, "and a small, triangular scar over his right eyebrow. A very interesting young man—"

GARROWAY had stiffened at her words, but this time it was with a tensing of interest. He leaned forward.

"A moment, my dear. Did you say . . . a small scar above his right eyebrow?"

"Why, yes."

"A triangular scar? You are certain of that?"

"Positive. Why?"

"Because if you are right—" The Overlord left the sentence dangling; strode to the wall audio and crisped sharp orders into its metallic throat. Elsewhere in the

palace a corps of underlings went into action, collecting swiftly the information demanded by their master. Within minutes there came a messenger, bearing a portfolio. This Garroway pawed through, selecting a photograph which he handed to the girl.

"Is this," he asked hoarsely, "the image you saw?"

The Princess Lenore took the photo, studied it, and nodded. "It is. I remember him well. Who is he?"

Garroway laughed. But now there was a touch of hysteria in his laughter, and his deeprooted fear struck new depths as he answered.

"His name is Dirk Morris . . . an underling."

"Dirk Morris," repeated the girl. "It is a pleasant name to the ears. Well . . . now that you know the identity of the Ghost, what are you going to do?"

Garroway said slowly, "I am going to do . . . nothing. Dirk Morris was put to death almost three weeks ago. The . . . the Galactic Ghost is a ghost indeed!"

The girl smiled. "Perhaps," she said thoughtfully. "But a ghost with very tangible body . . . and impulses. And, if I am not greatly mistaken, an Achilles' heel. Listen, my father. . . . I will drive a bargain with you. For a certain price, I will deliver into your hands this threat to your power."

"Price?" The Overlord stared at her bleakly. "What price do you ask?"

"The life," said the girl, "of the Ghost."

Garroway's brow darkened.

"Have you gone mad?" he demanded harshly. "His life is forfeit the moment my men seize him!"

"But," pointed out the Princess Lenore sagely, "they cannot lay hands on him . . . without my help. Come, father . . . I, too, can be ruthless in getting that which I desire. Will you give me the man, Dirk Morris, and put an end to these depredations? Or must your fortresses continue to fall because of all on earth, I alone know how this phantom may be caught?"

Garroway's cheeks were mottled with rage; for a moment it seemed he might strike his own daughter.

"You . . . you ingrate!" he husked.

"You dare bargain with the System's Emperor?"

"I dare bargain," taunted the Princess, "with my own father. And with a badly frightened man."

Garroway fumed at the taunt . . . but capitulated, as the Princess had known he must do. He lowered his hands weakly.

"Very well," he said. "I give you your price. Now, what must be done?"

"This—" said the Princess. And for a long time two remarkably similar heads, both in physiognomy and mentality, bent close together in conference. . . .

VI

"TONIGHT?" asked Dirk Morris. "You're sure, Neil?"

"This very night," swore Neil Hardesty. "At the Palace Royal. I got it on the highest authority. From one of the Imperial Guard, recently converted to our Cause. A grand meeting of the Emperor's strategy Council, summoned to discuss ways and means—" He grinned—"of apprehending the Galactic Ghost."

Dirk Morris smiled, too, though his features were invisible to his friend.

"The Ghost," he promised, "will attend the Council meeting. Neil, send out a hurried summons to all the Group. Tonight may be the night for which we have waited and planned. The situation has finally turned to our advantage. This is the setting we needed to strike our final, and heaviest, blow. A gathering of all Garroway's most trusted lieutenants! What better time to bring an abrupt end to his tyranny?"

"Destruction?" asked Brian Shaughnessy. "You plan to kill them all, Dirk?"

"That is not the best way. Killing would immortalize Garroway and—in the minds of many misguided people—forever brand the Galactic Ghost as an outlaw and murderer. No . . . I will not destroy the Overlord. I will make him appear ignominious in the eyes of his subjects . . . prove to all men that his vaunted powers are weak and futile. There is no weapon so strong as mirth, no blade so keen as scorn."

Vurrth grunted heavily. "Maybe better you kill, Dirk. No trust Overlord."

"My plans have been successful thus

far," pointed out the Voice of Conscience. "Play along with me a little farther. I think the end is in sight. Neil . . . be ready to send your forces into the Palace the moment I give the signal."

"Right!"

"And you, Brian . . . see that the audio-cast stations are controlled by us in time to speed word to the populace that the Emperor has been taken."

"Right, Dirk."

"And you, Vurrth—"

"Me be on hand," growled Vurrth, "to watch Overlord. No like this."

Dirk laughed. "As you will. Well . . . until tonight, comrades!"

Again, as oft before during these past weeks, the assembled brothers of the Group sensed the passage of a tingling vibrancy, and knew their leader had gone back to that strange, mysterious other universe which was now his home. Neil issued orders. The Group disbanded.

BACK on Nadron, Dirk Morris sighed and unlimbered himself of the heavy harness which necessity forced his wearing when he made his peregrinations between the two worlds. To the Ptan Slador he said, "Well . . . that's all I can do now. I shall try to rest until the hour comes."

"And then?" asked Slador.

"And then," repeated Dirk slowly, "success . . . at last. If everything goes well, tonight will mark the beginning of the end. Earth's greatest citadel will fall, carrying with it into destruction not only the Emperor, but all those upon whom the burden of his military power rests.

"With the fall of Earth, half the battle is won. No other planet is so tightly under Garroway's control as ours. With the Overlord imprisoned, the other worlds will burst free of their bondage . . . the System will know again the joys of liberty."

Rima said, "Dirk . . . you have laid careful plans for tonight? You have plotted every move you will make?"

"Under the circumstances, that is well-nigh impossible. I know only that the Emperor gathers with his staff. I shall have to make my entrance, then decide on the spur of the moment how best to accomplish my aims."

"You are sure—" hesitated the girl—"this is not a trap of some sort?"

"Trap?" Dirk laughed lightly. "How could it be?"

"I don't know. But the Overlord is no fool. He is a ruthless man . . . but he is no fool."

"He also," reminded Dirk, "thinks I am dead. The identity of the Galactic Ghost is, to him, a complete mystery. Were he to discover my identity, then perhaps I might have occasion to fear a trap of some sort, for . . . as you say . . . Garroway is no fool. He would realize, then, that the teleport brought about not death, but some sort of sinister change. But I am sure there is no danger. Ptan Slador . . . let us drink to success, and to the final reunion of our freed worlds!"

So they toasted a new life opening to all mankind. And the maiden, Rima, drank the toast with them. But even as she drank, her eyes were grave and thoughtful. . . .

NEVERTHELESS, despite his claims of confidence, it was with some slight degree of trepidation that Dirk Morris prepared for his ultimate exploit later that night. This was, he knew, his boldest stroke to date. He had hurled his forces elsewhere with supreme confidence. But always he had avoided too-close contact with Graed Garroway. For in his heart of hearts he agreed with Rima. He knew the Emperor to be, in truth, no fool . . . but a cunning adversary of infinite daring and resource.

Still, the die was cast now. The Group's preparations were made; he could not let them down. He must pave the way for the general uprising which would sweep Garroway from power . . . or his own scheming into disaster.

Slador and Rima accompanied him to the spot on Nadron where his translation was to take place. It was a tiny wooded glade, bathed in the cool moonlight of the alien planet. In the thickets small night-things chirruped, and from somewhere a sleepy bird sang a listless lullaby. Dirk, standing there breathing the sweet, fresh air of Nadron found it hard to believe that the mere pressure of a switch on his belt would place him on the musty, lower levels of that architectural monstrosity which was the Palace Royal . . . a tow-

ering structure of numberless stories . . . at the very topmost of which would be held the conference he pledged himself to end.

He held out a hand; first Slador, then Rima, gripped it warmly.

"Good luck!" said the Ptan. And Rima added, "We'll be waiting . . . and watching!"

Dirk nodded, not daring to trust his thoughts to words, and depressed the switch. As oft before he felt a churning moment of vertigo . . . then he stood in a lower corridor of the Palace Royal. Not ten feet distant stood an armed guard. This man stirred restlessly, his head turning as if he felt the electric disturbance of Dirk's entrance. But when his searching eyes found nothing, he returned to the pacing of his post. Dirk slipped past him swiftly, noiselessly, and to the first of the long series of staircases he must negotiate.

The Palace Royal was equipped with elevators, but these he dared not use. The movement of an "empty" elevator would be token enough to the wit-sharpened Palace guards that the dreaded Galactic Ghost was in their midst. So he pressed forward and upward to the heights of the tower.

It was a long climb and a brutal one. The Emperor's palace dwarfed to shame the puny "skyscraper" attempts of ancestors a thousand years removed. Thus it was a weary Dirk Morris who finally attained the topmost flight, and there rested himself briefly before entering the suite which comprised the Overlord's council chamber.

The vagrant thought struck him that the Palace was poorly guarded, considering the chaos into which the Ghost's activities should have thrown the Emperor. But this, he reasoned, might be but another proof of the weakening of Graed Garroway's grip; so undermined was the structure of his empire now that not even in his own bailiwick could he command the meticulous discipline he had heretofore exacted of his hirelings.

Rested at last, he moved toward the massive portal of the council hall. It hung slightly ajar; with no effort he inched it open and eased his still-invisible, but now substantial body through.

His entrance found the Overlord addressing a group seated in a semi-circle about the dais from which Garroway spoke. All backs save that of the Emperor himself were turned to Dirk. He moved forward silently, cautiously.

"—therefore, my lords and generals," the Overlord was saying, "it is vitally necessary that we apprehend this dastard, this criminal, who has so dared attack our government. Never until the so-called Galactic Ghost is captured and put to death will we be free to—"

"—to continue," said Dirk loudly, boldly, "your murderous onslaught against the rights and liberties of freedom loving people! Is that your meaning, Graed Garroway? Then abandon the thought. For truly, tonight your empire crumbles beneath you!"

"The Ghost!"

THE cry lifted in the hall; all heads whirled as one. Eyes opened wide in futile scanning, and jaws fell agape. And of all that vast, terrified assemblage, there was only one who did not freeze with sudden fear. That one was Garroway. Strangely, a smile seized his lips as he cried:

"Yes, the Ghost . . . as I had hoped! Guards . . . lights!"

Instantly the room, which had been cloaked in semi-darkness, blazed with the fury of a thousand beaming flares. And to his horror, Dirk Morris saw. . .

. . . not only those who had spun to face him, tight faces wreathed in scowls, hands gripping lethal weapons . . . but his own image, reflected a hundred times from every nook and corner of the vast hall! From a hundred mirrors placed to reflect in their revealing rock-quartz surfaces every move he made!

Too late, comprehension dawned upon him! Rima had guessed aright . . . this was a trap, ingeniously set for him by the Overlord, and now sprung at the proper moment. The Princess had revealed that which she had seen; the Overlord was clever enough to take advantage of it.

There was but one thing to do, and that quickly! In a trice, Dirk's hand leaped to the control stud on his belt, seeking to depress the switch that would return him to Nadron. But here, too, the Emperor had

anticipated his move. His voice again cleft the stark, foreboding silence.

"Field!"

And instantly there hummed through the room a shrill, whining current. It took but the split of a second for Dirk Morris to discern its purpose. For when his own hand tightened on the switch . . . nothing happened! He did not find himself hurling the vibration-span to the safety of Nadron. He remained where he was, writhing in the coils of an electric agony that coursed through his veins like liquid fire.

It was then the Overlord laughed, his voice a grating triumph.

"You see, Dirk Morris, it is useless! My scientists have probed the secret of your ghostly state . . . and you are snared in a net of their devising! Toss down your weapons!"

The grim purpose in his voice left Dirk no choice. Reluctantly he dropped to the floor the weapon with which he had hoped to capture Graed Garroway, stood still as grim-faced guards moved forward to grip him, bundle him to the dais wherefrom watched the smirking Overlord.

The tide was terribly turned. The biter was bitten!

VII

DIRK released the stud, pressure upon which had not brought him the escape he hoped, and gained some consolation in the fact that the pain faded. One thing he would *not* do, he pledged himself, was show fear or hurt before Garroway.

In as level a voice as he could muster he said, "So we meet again, Overlord of scavengers?"

Garroway laughed harshly.

"The trapped rabbit uses strong language still. You have profited little by your experience, I see, Dirk Morris."

"On the contrary," retorted Dirk, "I have profited much. And the measure of my profit lies in the dissolution of your empire . . . as you have learned in this past fortnight."

Garroway said, "True, you have caused me trouble. I acknowledge it. But that trouble is ended, now, for I have discovered—at last, but fortunately not too late.

—the true nature of the machine in which I had thought to execute you. It was *not* a disintegrating machine, but one that distorted the atoms of your body, rendering you invisible."

Dirk's heart leaped; he struggled to maintain the impassive mask which was his face, revealed to the Overlord in a hundred reflecting surfaces of quartz. Then not yet had Garroway learned of the existence of Nadron, of the adjacent universe. That, at least, was something to be thankful for.

He said, "It was a clever trap you set for me, Garroway. You announced a council meeting which you knew I must attend; you surround yourself not with your generals, as was expected, but with guards. You listened to the advice of your daughter, used rock-quartz to make my body visible—"

"—and," added Garroway complacently, "prepared an electric wave-transmitter that disrupted your own instrument, trapped you in our presence, and makes it impossible for you to escape.

"Well—" His voice changed abruptly—"your puny attempt to overthrow me has failed, Morris. As a fighter, I cannot restrain a certain degree of admiration for your effort, but as Emperor of the System, there is one thing I can, and must, do. *Guards—!*"

His voice was a thin snarl.

But as hulking stalwarts moved forward to perform his bidding, another slighter figure hastened before them to confront her parent. The Princess Lenore.

"Wait!" she commanded. "What means this, my parent? Why do you call the guards?"

"Return to your apartment, Lenore!" ordered Garroway sternly. "You have served your purpose. It is not seemly you should witness the judgment on this rebel."

"Have you forgotten your promise?" raged the woman. "You cannot kill this man. You pledged me his life!"

"Forget this foolish whim!" bade her father. "He is but an underling. Surely there are other men—"

"I want this one!" insisted Lenore. For a moment her dark, vivid eyes touched Dirk's with lingering ferocity . . . and despite the tenseness of the moment,

the peril of his situation, Dirk Morris could not restrain the quick thrill of admiration and . . . something else which burned through him. His brain tossed in a turmoil of conflicting emotions. He understood, now, why an ungovernable impulse had caused him to sweep this girl into his arms that night in her apartment. It was because she was . . . she was his type of woman! A hard, gallant, ruthless fighting-woman who knew what she wanted and would adopt any measures to get it.

There was Rima on Nadron . . . true. He respected her. For her he felt—though he had known her but a short time—a great tenderness and affection. But it was not true love. It was a brotherly feeling; a comfortable confidence in her presence and companionship.

This girl, the Princess Lenore, alone could stir his veins to running fire; she alone quickened a hungry spark within him. It was mad . . . it was impossible . . . but true. He loved—and the knowledge of it struck Dirk Morris with brutally staggering force—he loved an enemy and the daughter of his bitterest foe!

Stranger yet . . . she loved him!

Now she was talking again, hurriedly arguing a case to win his life.

"It is not necessary to kill this man, my parent. It would be folly to do so. Think! On all this world . . . in all this universe . . . there are few men worthy of the name of *man*! Your court is a *melange* of smirking nincompoops and weaklings. Who amongst them can match in strength and vigor the spirit of Dirk Morris? Which can compare with him in audacity and daring?"

"That," desponded her father darkly, "is why he must die. I cannot allow so dangerous a foe to live—"

"No? Have you forgotten the medical science of which your attendants are capable? Think, my father . . . were it not better to make slight alterations in this man's brain, converting him to a true and faithful servant, than to destroy forever the bravery in his heart?"

The words struck home. Garroway frowned thoughtfully.

"It is true," he mused. "A slight operation . . . a period in the Mental Clinic to erase from his brain-passage all thoughts

of rebellion . . . would make him a new man. But it is too great a chance. Were anything to go wrong—"

The Princess Lenore gazed at him scornfully.

"I see. Very well, then—" With slow, deliberate movements she reached up, stripped from her raven hair the glittering imperial emblem which designated her a member of the Family Royal—"if such must be your decision, so be it? But I . . . I shall no longer confess myself a Garroway. If the word of the Emperor is so lightly to be given. . . ."

And this time she was triumphant. Her scorn hit the Overlord in his one most vulnerable spot . . . his colossal vanity. His dark eyes flamed with petulance. He snarled, "Oh, let be! No man shall say the Overlord retracted a pledge. If you must have this man—" He turned to Morris—"Well, what say *you*, rebel? Are you too proud to buy your life at the expense of rebellion? Or will you accept life at the price of a new existence of loyalty . . . to me?"

DIRK wavered, sorely tempted. Until this moment his life had been consecrated to a single Cause . . . the overthrow of Garroway's cruel empire. But now, suddenly, strangely, singingly, had entered into it another influence . . . love for a woman of matchless courage and beauty.

His attempts to destroy Garroway had failed. He was hopelessly ensnared, his cohorts could not save him. Years might pass before another Dirk Morris arose to lead malcontents in rebellion. Neil Hardesty was a good man, a strong and faithful friend . . . but he lacked the spark of genius that leads lost causes to success.

Perhaps it would be better, in the long run, to accept defeat . . . and in accepting it, accept also such share of happiness as this world had to offer. As the mate of Lenore he would live a new life, all rebellious thoughts exiled from his brain by the surgery of Garroway's physicians. . . .

So he hesitated, and for those tense moments the fate of a world hung in the balance. But then . . . honor won! With infinite sadness, but with courage too, Dirk Morris made his answer. It was symbolic that he made it to the Princess.

"I am sorry, my Princess," he said quietly. "I know a great wonder, and a great pride, that you have made this plea for me. But . . . I cannot accept life on such terms. For me there is but one clear and unavoidable path . . . to go on. This path I must choose to glory or . . . the grave."

"Don't be a fool!" cried the girl. "Don't you see you can gain nothing by this gesture. You have no choice!"

Her words were sharp . . . but her voice was fearful. Dirk recognized this as he said, still softly, "Yes, that, too, I see. And, believe me, Princess, I am deeply sorry. But I have made my choice."

For an instant that seemed eternities the Princess Lenore, she who had until a fortnight since known passion for nothing save costly baubles, stared into Dirk's eyes. Then a little sob broke from her lips, and she turned away.

And the Emperor nodded.

"Guards!" he said. "Take this man—"

It was a command that was never obeyed . . . an order never completed! For at that moment came interruption in the form of a violent blast that shook the entire council hall as a thatched shack trembles in a cyclone's wake. A column of living fire blossomed in the room; eyes burned and eardrums throbbed to see and hear the tingling of an unleashed and unguessable force turned loose in their midst.

And in the heart of this column, loose-girt in shining white, radiant as a goddess, but calm with the ominous quiet of powers unfathomable . . . stood the girl, *Rima of Nadron!*

IT was Morris who first recovered sufficiently from the unexpected appearance to make a movement. A cry broke from his lips, "*Rima!*" He moved toward the girl. But her voice lifted in crisp warning.

"Back, Dirk! To touch this flame means death!"

Her words stopped not only Morris, but a group of the Imperial Guards who, as one, had now spun toward the visitant. They faltered, stopped dead in their tracks and turned to the Overlord for guidance.

Graed Garroway's black eyebrows were knit with rage and bafflement. He demanded hoarsely, "Who is this woman?

And whence comes she, that she dares enter the stronghold of the Emperor?"

It was incredible how fortetful could be the tones of Rima. Her voice was dulcet sweet, but carried conviction.

"I am of a race that ruled this world before your ilk was spawned, Black Garroway . . . a race whose least remembered knowledge so surpasses your own that you are as pawns with which we play at will.

"I came because the evil in your heart has inspired you to do a great wrong . . . a wrong upon mankind that we, who once loved Earth, can neither condone nor allow. I came to free Dirk Morris, and to free Earth of a tyrant.

"Dirk . . . bid the Emperor step from his dais. He no longer rules this city or this System."

"No longer rules—" choked Garroway.

"The city has fallen," said Rima. "While in this tower you plotted for the life of a rebel leader, you have lost an empire. Listen . . . or better yet, turn on your vis-screens. Therein you will see I speak the truth."

In sudden, fumbling haste Graed Garroway turned to a vision-unit set in the auditorium wall. Instantly a section of the capital city sprawled before the gaze of those assembled. It was as Rima had foretold. No matter where the dial was swung, there reflected the same scene: people leaping, laughing, rejoicing in the streets . . . marching in vast, inchoate crowds, singing and cheering. Here and there were grisly evidences of the reason for their rejoicing . . . a knot of tumbled bodies garbed in the uniform of Garroway's forces . . . a burning pyre which had been an Imperial blockhouse . . . a torn, stained militiaman's cap lying in a gutter.

And now, to further the evidence, came the sound of voices, running footsteps, through the tower itself. And into the council hall flooded a host of jubilant freedmen, led by a trio at sight of whom Dirk's heart filled with gladness. The gigantic Vurrth, grinning from ear to ear and wearing a jacket snatched from a fallen foe . . . a jacket that had ripped up the back under the strain of the Venusian's mighty muscles. Brian Shaughnessey, bellowing loud greetings. Neil Hardesty, grave and

quiet as ever, even in this hour of triumph, as he spoke to his leader.

"It is over, Dirk. You have succeeded here, too?"

Dirk said ruefully, "I have succeeded, yes. But it was not of my doing. Rima—"

"He has succeeded," interrupted the Nadronian girl, "The Emperor is deposed."

Neil said gratefully, "We awaited your signal, Dirk. When it did not come we grew anxious. Then Rima—" For an instant his eyes sought those of the alien girl, and there was a curious humility in them, an almost worshipful admiration—"then Rima came to us; told us the hour had struck. We issued our rallying cry. It . . . it was easier than we had dared hope. The city was like a ripe plum, ready for our taking. At every street-corner new hordes joined us. Even Garroway's hirelings abandoned their old leaders to follow the standard of the fabulous Galactic Ghost."

"Thus, you see," said Rima so softly that only Dirk could hear her, "you *did* succeed, Dirk Morris. It was the Ghost whose spirit forged this rebellion. I but stepped in when the moment needed me."

GARROWAY, who had been standing at the vision plate, staring as a man transfixed at the image of his own downfall, now turned to his destroyers. His dark eyes were haggard, his sagging jowls suddenly no longer the harsh features of a ruler, but those of a defeated old man. He whispered:

"This, then, is the end? Very well—" A burst of his former defiance flamed in him. He forced a laugh. "You have won, Dirk Morris. And the death I promised you lies in store for me? Well . . . so be it. It has been a long game, but one worth the playing. Of one thing you cannot rob me . . . the memory that once I ruled the mightiest empire known to man."

But again it was Rima who spoke. Her voice was like a crystal bell.

"Not death, Graed Garroway. It is the right of none to judge that ultimate penalty on another. *Exile* shall be your fate. Those who know your system better than I shall decide which planet . . . or planetoid far removed from Earth . . . shall be your final refuge.

"Neil Hardesty—" She turned to the

listening captain—"send him away. Your new government shall sit in judgment on him later."

Hardesty nodded, motioned to Shaughnessey, and the erstwhile Overlord was led away. With him were herded from the room, none too gently, those who had been his companions in the attempt to trap Dirk. Within a matter of minutes the hall was cleared save for a handful: Dirk and Rima, in her glowing pillar of flame; Hardesty, the Princess Lenore.

In the Princess' eyes glittered a great defiance and a great sorrow. She asked, "And I? I join my father in exile?"

Rima looked at Dirk.

"Well, Dirk Morris?" she asked.

Dirk's throat was dry, his mind confusion. He said, "Must . . . must I, then, be the one to judge, Rima? She saved my life . . . or tried to. Were it not for her—"

Rima said gently, "You love her. Isn't that what you mean, Dirk?"

Dirk's head turned slowly; his eyes met those of the Princess Lenore. And what he found there forced the answer from his lips.

"Yes, Rima. May the gods help me . . . I love her."

"That," said the Nadronian girl, "I know. And this also I know . . . that she loves you. Does she love you enough to join you in the new world which is the only one whereon you now can live? Enough to join you on Nadron?"

It was Lenore who answered that question. She said simply, "I do not understand your meaning, woman who dwells in a column of flame . . . but this much I *do* know. Where Dirk Morris dwells, there would I dwell also."

Rima nodded, satisfied.

"That, too, I had expected. It is well. She will make you a good mate, Dirk Morris. I wish—" There was a strange catch in her voice, a catch clenched teeth upon her lower lip could not quite stifle—"I wish you . . . much joy . . . in my lost, beloved homeland—"

Dirk stared at her aghast, uncomprehending. "Rima!" he cried. "Lost homeland? I don't understand—"

The maid of Nadron smiled wanly. Her voice, when she spoke, was infinitely gentle.

"Surely *you* should know, Dirk Morris,

that one cannot pass with impunity from one universe of vibration to another?"

Dirk said, "You mean that you, as I did, have become a . . . a wraith to your own world? That henceforth you have no true existence on Nadron, as I none on Earth?"

Rima nodded quietly, sadly.

"But then," stammered Dirk, "if not on Nadron, where is your new plane of existence?" A hope caught and tugged at his heart. "Earth, perhaps? Our planet will become your new world?"

RIMA shook her head. "No, Dirk Morris. The atomic pathway of Space-Time winds ever upward . . . not downward to a lower vibrational plane. When this protective shield, which already wanes—" She glanced with a swift, despairing apprehension as the iridescence dulled, and a crepuscular wavering dimmed its outlines—"When this shield wanes, I shall move . . . forward to a bourne I cannot guess. A better world, perhaps, or . . . a worse—"

"No!" cried Dirk. He started forward, but within the blazing column a white arm rose in stern command.

"No farther, Dirk. To touch this field means death!"

"Rima!" cried Dirk huskily. "Rima, you shouldn't have done this. It wasn't required of you!"

"The quest of liberty," said the girl softly, "is the quest of all men, all women, everywhere. I was watching your progress, Dirk. When I saw you had been trapped, I knew someone must come to your aid, someone must carry out the plans you had so carefully laid.

"My father was too old. The journey between our two worlds is . . . well, not without pain. So—" The girl smiled—"I came."

"You sacrificed yourself," cried Dirk humbly, "for us. It is too much. Earth can never repay you, Rima."

"I was repaid when you refused life at the expense of your own honor, Dirk. Now it is done I can tell you that on your decision at that moment rested the future fate of Earth. We of Nadron have ever hesitated in dabbling in the affairs of others. Had you proved unworthy of our

aid in that moment of trial. I would not have made the journey.

"And now—" There flickered in her eyes a shadow of thin, wondering fear as the veil of flame about her seemed to shudder—"the time has come for . . . parting—"

"No!" shouted Dirk, as if by the very strength of his cry he could withhold the inexorable. "No, Rima! Don't—"

His cry ended in a little moan. For at that moment the shimmering column trembled and . . . vanished like the flame of a snuffed candle. The last vision of Rima to be burned forevermore upon the retina of Dirk Morris' memory was that of a slim and gallant goddess, whiteclad, lifting a soft arm in salute . . . and farewell.

Then . . . nothing.

DIRK turned away, shaken. He whispered, "Gone! Rima . . . gone . . . no one knows where—"

Lenore said soberly, "*She* loved you, too, Dirk."

"No. She never loved me. Not as I love you . . . not as you love me—"

"It was a different kind of love," said the princess.

"I will find her!" vowed Dirk brokenly.

Lenore moved to his side quietly; the warmth of her beside him like the courage of a voice in the wilderness.

"You and I," she breathed, "together, Dirk."

And suddenly, though there stretched before him a new and greater quest than that recently acquitted, Dirk was consumed with a vast impatience to know again the lips of the girl whose nearness was a heady wine, challenging him to dare any danger. He turned to Lenore.

"Together," he agreed. "But first I must return to Nadron to lay the plans. You . . . you will come soon, my Princess?"

"Soon," she promised. "Soon. But, first—"

She moved toward his voice. If she closed her eyes, she could not tell it was invisible arms that held her close, nor invisible lips that quickened upon her own. . . .



THE VIZIGRAPH

And so we meet again, you Vizifanners, bringing good news, bad news, and a load of bricks and bouquets from the men and women who make this department possible.

First, the good news. We've bought some crackerjack short novels for *PLANET STORIES*, in answer to your requests, and they will see print shortly.

Secondly, the bad news. With this issue, *PLANET STORIES* goes back to its old quarterly schedule. Not because of sales or lack of reader response—but because the needs of war have curtailed the raw materials needed for the publication of magazines. Frankly, we don't mind so much, if our small efforts help to shorten the days of battling ahead. And when those days are over, when people again walk unafraid in all the countries of the world, then again will we try to bring this book to you more often each year. Until then, we hope our efforts to bring a bit of forgetfulness, or hopes or reading pleasure into your lives will not be in vain. For we have a feeling of respect and friendliness about all of you that we hope is not buried too deeply behind our editorial stuffiness.

But enough of that. Keep those letters coming in along with votes for favorite letters of each issue. We'll tack on a comment or two of our own, when we feel so inclined. And we hope there will be no offense taken by you, as we take no real offense from your letters. Kick us around; we'll smack you around—and if you really get too tough, well, we can always claim 'foul' and ask for a rematch—on our terms.

That's us—always figuring angles!

We also figured something else. We have it deep in our mind that, if the following Vizifanners will write us, then their illustrations will hit the mails the same day we have knowledge of their choices.

1—Alan Mannion 2—Chad Oliver 3—Dick Hetschel

LESSER PUTS US STRAIGHT!

Brooklyn, N. Y.
2302 Ave. O

DEAR EDITOR:

Before I go into the ghoulish details of what is commonly called "a letter to ye ed," I will speak in defense of one Milt Lesser, the Happy Genius. Larry Shaw indicates in no round-about manner that Lesser is slinging a senseless conglomeration of words in all directions' words that have no coherency. I would like to put everyone straight as far as that matter is concerned. In the last two Lesser letters, for some inexplicable reason, the Printer's Devil has done a botch-job. And that's the truth. The Happy G. letters have been, literally speaking, "messed up!" And it wasn't the Genius' fault, no kiddin'. *Who am I?* Oh, just a fan known as Milt Lesser. . . .

I can't promise you that this letter will actually cad at only three double-spaced pages. But it won't be much longer, anyway. Really, it's rather hard for some of us veteran Vizifanners to limit ourselves to a mere nine or so hundred words. Sometimes it just can't be done. (Still though, you see, I am adhering to one of your requests. I am typing this letter double-spaced. Aren't you happy? Me neither!)

About the idea of living with a story's heroes through their adventures—in my humble opinion, Leigh Brackett, bless her lil' heart, is the author on your current staff, most capable of doing such a thing. Mannion, incidentally, is a very good, and modest, letter writer. The modest part comes in when he says, rather ridiculously, "And which Lesser expressed so much more forcibly than I can—"! Is he kidding? I took just several sentences to cover it, not going into elaborate detail or anything of the like. Friend Mannion really did it "right." He gave the suggestion the space I should have allotted to it. Tho, actually, even this genius must admit that he couldn't have done a better job than Mannion. Thanx, anyway, Alan.

Chad Oliver, our Loon Kid (I won't let the letters be the same, so I'm substituting Kid for Lad). Anyway, to start over; our Loon Kid suggested to me, via the portals of mental telepathy (also known as Uncle Sam's Mail Service) that PLANET should run two three-ish serials per year. Sorry, Chad, thought back I, but in a bi-monthly mag, the suspense would drive too many of us poor, innocent readers along the well-known path that leads toward the portals of idiocy.

While I'm floating around the Viz, I'll cast votes for Mannion, Oliver and Shaw. (Apologies to Jay Chidsey, but really, Ed's Lil Helper, your letter was too short to merit anything other than a swat across the back in congratulations at breaking into the merry fold.)

To our Recluse, the Vapid Vagabond known as Larry Shaw, I hope you'll consider the fact that the type-setter seriously did mess up my last two letters something awful. (Dear, dear Printer's devil, take it easy on this letter, willya, huh? My reputation is at stake!)

Incidentally, WP, this letter is going to merit an original, see. The fact is, my palm is itching to receive another. All I have to date are Paul's for Vassals of the M. W., and Leydenfrost's for the Pied P. of M.

Thanx, Hetschel, for seeing the argument my way. Nice letter, too. You take fourth. But, sad thought, what worldly goods does that do you? Oh well, you can still try again.

The Leydenfrost brothers are excellent—yet, of course, they do not equal their father. I think their drawings could improve if they were "cleared up" a bit. Bob, I think, has slightly better possibilities than Harry. Paul's pic was nice, not up to FP par though. It was good enough, however, to be the best in the issue. Sorry, but Saaf isn't of any value. Nor is Doolin's work in this ish. The latter seems to have his ups and downs. Lubbers' is the art field's version of back. The artist (?) for Hasse and de Pina's story is straight from the comics—and don't deny it! He looks it, too!

As for the criticism you put up in regard to our criticisms—while you're right, for the most part, I hardly think it's fair to stop criticisms that on the surface may seem unconstructive. For instance, if you received a letter saying that one

artist, after he has been seen several times in PS, is no darn good—even tho that comment might seem not a bit constructive, it actually is. For, if the artist is no good (for argument's sake, we'll say that Joe Fan was correct for once) then it would be a helpful hint, if ye ed were to follow it. You'd "brush off" said artist, and thus improve the mag. Seriously, I'd like to hear your opinion on that.

However, here we are in the middle of the third page, and I haven't even begun to talk about the stories. Well, it might go into the fourth, but that's not too bad. Besides, such a GOOD letter, and all that!

The stories were rather varied, judging them all together. Several were above average-readable, and two were far below it. One, in particular; but more about that later.

(Just because I happen to be in a good mood, I will not rate the yarns against each other. I'll just comment individually. Fair enuff?)

Hasse and de Pina were good in the lead novel. *Alcatraz of the Starways* WAS FINE ADVENTURE, good characterization, stale plot. I liked it, however, a lot.

The Sandhound by Rocklyne was written nicely, but it's just the story I DIDN'T like. Why? Well, the idea was er. . . You see, those future detective stories are a strict taboo with me. Puhleeze!

I really lived with Brackett's characters in the *Blue Behemoth*. Extra-fine. This lass really is good. She knows how to write—as I've already stated.

Stranger From Space, by Bok was, well,—pretty good. That discovery-of-Robot plot really is overused of late.

The Meteor Makers, by Hamilton, was slightly below par. It had an excellent plot, yet the writing held it down. Peter shows promise, tho. He's just stiff, I think.

H.L. Gold's *Gripter's Asteroid* was simply plotless, yet, I enjoyed it. Straight humor has its place once in a while.

Richard Storey's *Menace of the Mist*, along with *Blue Behemoth* and *Alcatraz of the Starways* was one of the three best in the ish. The plot was something to rave about. The story itself had fine writing, characterization, plus, well, plus just about everything necessary.

Yes, I like the new head for the title page. Who, by the way, drew it?

(Doolin! Ed.)

Well, this is 3½ pages double-spaced, and I'd better shut my aggressive typewriter before you quit in the middle of this affair.

I DON'T SEE HOW THE VIZ GOT ALONG WITHOUT ME IN THE MAY ISH!!!

Where and when is my conception of an all-star ish going to appear? I want the cover by Paul, interiors by Paul, any of the Leydenfrosts, and a new find named Lawrence, plus our returning marvel, Bok. The yarns should be: Novel by BINDER, shorter novel by Bond, shorts by Hasse, Storey, Wellman, Cartmill. What (as ed screams his head off) a banner ish that could be! Oh, well. . . Who's next?

Sincerely,

MILT LESSER—*The Happy Genius*.

ORCHIDS TO US!

4523 Broadway,
Chicago, Illinois

DEAR EDITOR:

After painstakingly reading the March issue of *PLANET STORIES*, I suggest a vote of thanks for you. I said "painstakingly," because although the term sounds incongruous in connection with "pleasure reading" I was determined to ascertain if your promise to give us a better *PLANET* was merely a "sop" to pacify the fans, or a conviction that it was feasible and warranted to accept only the better stories and reject the sort of fiction which certain writers want to palm off as science fiction stories.

First in the order of excellence, I find a very short story by an unknown and an old *PLANET* writer—*Star of Panadur*, by Hasse & De Pina.

You will doubtless be surprised at this selection, since the larger works always command precedence. But I am a writer too, and I recognize fine prose and skillful characterization when I see it. The writing of this story was so good that it could easily have been in a "slick" magazine. The characterizations were better than anything I've seen for a long while, particularly the psychological bits about the Panadur leader. I found various passages that are worthy of being remembered. One where the authors say: "*He was in a grotto of titanic proportions. The substance of its walls and distant ceiling gave it the gentle radiance of a sunless day. But it was a glaucous radiance, ineffably green, as the light beneath the waters of a shallow sea.*" And that my dear *Fren'* IS writing description! Pity it was such a very tiny story. If this new team can do such a really delightful short, I am wondering if you could get them to do a Novel, or at least a Novelette. Hasse is essentially an imaginative adventure writer, and a good one, but I have never read anything as polished as this by him. Sometimes collaboration does miracles for two writers. *More of both.*

My second choice is *SLAVES OF THE NINTH MOON* by Ross Rocklyne. This writer has slipped up a couple of times recently so it is a profound relief to find this exciting novelette.

Third, and running the above a very close second is:

THE SWORD OF JOHNNY DAMOKLES, by Hugh F. Parker.

Do not be deceived, this is as imaginative and brilliantly handled a story, as I have seen in *PLANET* in a *Blue Moon*. True, the plot has been done before in a slightly different fashion, but there are moments in this story that are really superb. The parallel between the legendary sword and the Impervium Bomb turned against the Neptunians who fashioned it, is not only ironic—it's delicious. AND, there's a reason for all that happens!

Fourth, for the sake of charity (and it is charity!):

Leigh Brackett's *CITADEL OF LOST SHIPS*.

There is a length and breadth and height to literature, just as there is to everything in life, but it just happens that something occurs to a writer which makes him or her depict life in only *TWO DIMENSIONS*—and this is just what seems to have happened to Brackett. Her story lacks perspective. Her treatment of the *Kraylens* is so unlike her mastery of SF writing

that I for one didn't give a . . . continental what happened to them. As for the motif of the decadent, anti-social, unassimilable castaways of the *ROMANY* world, one felt the place should have been fumigated! As for the ending . . . arrgh! There was one simple, microscopic bit, sandwiched between a plethora of bathos and pathos and flat slow-moving action that failed to act, and descriptions that failed to describe, and that was there the "Little Fathers," (Saturnian Quarter,) give them shelter in the name of Freedom—and that was all. I was astounded, disgusted and flabbergasted. Please, just because of the name, for no other reason would that story be purchased!

However, I sense a definite upwards trend in *PLANET* and I hope we may see more of Mr. Hasse and Mr. De Pina, particularly in the longer lengths, it would be interesting to see what they can do.

Incidentally, concerning your request for opinions on whether you should write under your own name or not. Only utter fools would want you to write under any other name but yours. . . WE fans will most certainly apply the scalpel to your creative children and woe unto you if you give us HACK!

With very best wishes for continued betterment of *PLANET*, I am

Sincerely,
WILMS HERBERT,
N.B.C. Character Delineator.

DISAPPOINTMENT, HEINER? NO!

225 Second St.,
California, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

THE ZWILNIK IS BACK!! After quite a period the Heiner typer goes to work on a misadventure to *PLANET*. Most of what I have to say will meet with scorn and overcast brows but never-the-less *SHALL* be said.

This is my first since you, Mr. Editor, have taken over the controls on the old space tub, *PLANET*. Perhaps I should begin by saying that the mag has improved with new editorship but the fact that *PLANET* has, in the past few months, taken a turn for the worse, prohibits the statement of the fact. The March issue was simply and decisively a stinkeroo. Mal had better take more time for P.S. and you, Sir, had better begin choosing better line-ups as to contents. Incidentally, where did you really find all that trash in the March ish?

Sooooo . . . to begin, *COSMIC CASTAWAY* was at best—punk. A more woe-begotten piece of absolute nothing have I never had the disastrous twist of Fate to encounter in any mag, and to think that I should have to open *PLANET* to find it. The story was one of those that keeps the reader in suspense, all right.

To begin the piece of criticism, nothing happened 'till the white saber-tooth beasts entered the story. Why were they brought up at all? Wasn't it convenient to the writer that a huge gaping hole was torn in the ship? And directly in a position that the hero was thrown clear of the wrecked craft. Well, to shorten the whole thing, after various adventures with the beautiful Earth girl, alien world horrors and sundry incidental characters, our Hero discovers a sure way to put the well known crimp in the plans of the Heavy, Drum Faggard. With the discovery of a machine years old, he solves the problem. A machine that has weathered the centuries is re-

paired in the proverbial wink of an eye. And with nothing more complicated than, of all things, a STILSON WRENCH. WOW!!! The description of the machine was elaborately scientific. I quote: "Mounted on wheels, the instrument consisted of a small cart with twin panels and a confusing array of dials"—unquote. All in all, the whole darn thing smelled to high-heaven.

ORIDIN'S FORMULA: Paging Mr. Einstein!! Where is the science in this story? In fact, where is the fiction? In fact, where is the sense? The only good thing about this yarn was the briefness of the thing.

STAR OF PANADAR: Hasse had better forget about collaboration. He is one of my favorites, but can't say much for "STAR..."

TROUBLE ON TYCHO: Bond fell away off his usual high standard. No other comment.

Ross Rocklynn topped the list with SLAVES OF THE NINTH MOON. Leave it to Ross to introduce the unusual. The story, as a whole, was very good. (There, I did say something nice.)

THE FLAME BREATHERS by Ray Cummings was one of the best shorts he has ever written. I do not care especially for this writer's shorter yarns but must give credit where credit is due. Incidentally, I dislike to read letters stating the fact that the writers of such have the idea that Cummings is a hack. You know, Ed, a fellow should be ashamed to say such a thing. People might get the idea that he was a little off. AND THEY'D BE ENTIRELY CORRECT. Cummings has kept his name alive and his cupboard well stocked with the very quality of his work. I personally challenge any and all who, in the future, refer to Ray Cummings as Hack. Yes, and with Z-rays.

CITADEL OF LOST SHIPS: The same ol' gal in a new dress. Not bad, but not good.

Parker's piece didn't rate even a slam. Let it go at that.

Now to the Vizigraph:

I agree with Ken Mackenzie that a little more science would not hurt PLANET in the least. I do not, however, agree with his statement that what it needs is less fiction. What is a story without fiction? No story at all. Give us readers straight fiction with scientific explanations and backgrounds. A little Fantasy never yet ruined a plot, either. (Boy, will I ever get it for that statement.)

Leydenfrost is good in spite of the fact that he cannot be compared with Hannes Bok, which comparison was made by one of P.S.'s readers. As for Anderson, anyone who really thinks that Hannes will ever be forced to look to his laurels because of this scratch-artist is very much off the beam.

And now, on to the pics. Ugh. . .

The cover was one of the best used on PLANET to date. Rozen may yet be one of my favorites. The gal was plentifully . . . plentifully . . . well, she was just plentifully. The guy was slightly reminiscent of Burrough's John Carter, leather trappings and all. The things horrible, and that is what they were meant to be. The only kick as to this cover is made because of the background. It was a typical PLANET back. Anyhow—roses to Rozen.

Paul needs nothing; he has it all. Please make my original a Paul or Bok—or Leydenfrost.

Doolin stinks. Phooey!!!

If you MUST use "stuff" like that drawing of Walker's on page 91, I have a four year old son

who does nicely. May I show you some of his doodlin'?

I'm not going to use the time-worn phrase, "knowing that this letter will never see print." In fact if it isn't printed I'll be very disappointed. Enough for this time.

Sincerely,

VAUGHAN RALF HEINER—*The Zwiinik*.

HELP!!!

Gad! How could we stood to such a beating! Heiner did everything but quarter us. We are bloody, but unbowed. We're stunned, astounded, amazed and shaken by the vehemence of his observations.

Our feelings are hurt.

So we fight back.

We're mad.

Even enraged.

We'll hold the coat of anybody big enough to challenge the Zwiinik to battle.

Is there *none* who would protect a frail defenseless editor?

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

ACCURATE CARTER!

156 S. University Street
Blackfoot, Idaho

DEAR EDITOR:

Greece! (gasp, choke). Cough, cough. . .

The above is as accurate an opinion of the March cover for PS as I can jolly well give you. Strongly reminiscent of the lousy days of Drake. *Pooey!* One would presume the characters to be out in space. QX, then why the advanced degree of nudity? People do breathe, you know, even in PLANET STORIES.

The interior situation is much, much better. Give Paul the honors again, as usual, his spread being the best; third comes—hmm, this'll be tough, let's say any one *except* pages 25 and 44.

Marlow's letter in the Vizigraph is a riot; give it top billing. The Happy Genius comes in second, followed by "Case Number 4u-2-a-10." By the way, you'd better make a ruling on the letters in "Feature Flash"; shall we vote for 'em or not? Answer, please. . . I'd like to know whether or not a fan could take two prizes an issue; this could be developed into a racket if not controlled. (Malicious little thought, eh, Ed? Too bad I didn't copyright it.)

Time out while this correspondent spits on his hands. This time we are going to have one sweet mess rating the stories, as there were a lot of good ones. Anyway, to proceed:

1. Rocklynn comes through again. Maybe this series is beginning to smell of a little formula; compare it with *some* of the drivel that has been turned out in the name of interplanetary fiction, and its refreshing plot-twist (Nasty Earthman and Admirable Aliens) is seen to be a world-beater none the less. More power to Ross, though I'd like to see one of his alien races not get killed off, some time, so Hallmyer will feel less like a heel. The title to this one is almost as bad as the cover when it comes to raising a stench, unfortunately. "Slaves of the Ninth Moon." I thought, or was I reading wrongly, that the action took place on "Perp-planet number 3."

2. Miss Brackett's "Citadel of Lost Ships" is an example that certain hacks ought to take to heart. She manages to cram in enough action to delight a pulpster's heart, and still create a hero who *isn't* as noble as Abe Lincoln and a heroine

who isn't all sweetness and light. The hero is on the way to jail at the end of the story; that's a good touch, as the average hero in fiction breaks the law and gets away with it, and a pat on the back from Commander So-and-So because he's really been a space dick all the time, under cover. And the alien allies are neither helpless nor irresistible. That's good. The net effect is that the reader *wants* Miss Brackett's characters to come out on top; tragedy has punch to it, and so does triumph. Some authors, on the other hand . . . well, need I go into detail?

3. "Trouble on Tycho." The mad, yet lovable characters that Bond can create when he wants to really stick in the memory. A bagpipe-playing weatherman on the moon—ever seen one before, boys?

4. "Oridin's Formula." Wouldn't be up here except that I like this kind of plot, in which a mild-looking scientist lures a villain to his den and drives him nuts. Mind over matter—who was it that said "no matter how far in the future, science-fiction's heroes generally resort to fists because their science won't stand the gaff"?

5. Whoops! Don't tell me Cummings is up here! His vacation from PS must have done him good. True, the plot runs true-to-form, but a truly fantastic setting has worked wonders. I only wish Miss Brackett, or somebody else with characters, could have made use of these excellent props. They're so good I'm a little suspicious.

6. "Star of Panadur." Nicely written, but, after all, there's not much to it.

7. "The Sword of Johnny Damokles"—the idea isn't the newest thing under the sun, and some good character-tags are ruined by poor handling. I'm glad, though, that Thurner turned out to be an actual Neptunian instead of a renegade Earthman, thus sparing us the following aged conversation:

HERO: "Blanketty-blank you, Rudolf Rassendale, isn't there enough blanketty-blank decency in your blanketty-blank mind to keep you from turning traitor to the blanketty-blank enemy?"

VILLAIN: "Ha, ha."

But we digress. Number eight is "Cosmic Castaway." It started out in a grand style, as if 'twould be the best story in the issue. I licked my lips in anticipation: "Ahhhh. Here's a space-wreck story as is a space-wreck story." Then it flopped, miserably. Once in a while one can dispense with a heroine, you know. No need to drag her in by the hair. And astronomical objections entered in, too. Drop everything after Chapter Four, and, incomplete as it then would be, it would certainly rate higher.

Now for a few suggestions—oh-oh. His Majesty, the Editor, is getting that "wastebasket" gleam in his left eye (his right being occupied watching the staff, to make sure they don't let in the notorious Mr. Drake again; more power to the Editor's right eye). To steal a phrase from another fan—this is legal, as *he* stole it from Lowell Thomas—So Long Until Next Issue.

Sincerely,

PAUL CARTER.

CONFUSED EDITOR!

Nope, no voting on the Feature Flash letters; just for those that grace (?) this department. And these darned questions about the titles—what are you trying to do, *reform* us?

Tsk, tsk. Better read Brackett's ending again.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

AS IT WAS!

405 S. Fifth Street
Bozeman, Montana

I have just finished reading the May issue of *PLANET STORIES*. It is a very good issue except for TWO things! The COVER! I do not see hardly any tie-up with the story "ALCATRAZ of the STARWAYS," or any of the other stories. If the man and woman are supposed to be escaping, why is the woman wearing a jeweled belt? The second thing that is wrong is the story, "The SANDHOUND!" Rocklynne has a good plot and good ideas, but, he has trouble putting them into words. In places there is too much description and in others not enough.

"ALCATRAZ of the STARWAYS" and "The METEOR MAKERS" in my opinion tie for the first place. To me, the plot of both stories seems to be about the same. "STRANGER FROM SPACE," gets second place. That is a *VERY GOOD* story! The plot sounds new to me, it is not one of the plots that has been used so much that it has whiskers, and the ending is altogether different than what I expected. "MENACE of the MISTS" and "The BLUE BEHEMOTH" tie for third place. "GRIFTER'S ASTEROID" was good for a few laughs.

It used to be when one picked up a *PLANET STORY* magazine; you could step right into the story. It *HAD* the right wording, plot, and other things that help to make you live the story. Could you get some more writers or make the older ones change a little so that *HAD* can be changed to *HAVE*?!

Sincerely,

NANCY EILEEN FREDERSDORFF,

"Amateur."

GRAY GOES GOOEY!

Box 204

Hartshorne, Oklahoma

DEAR EDITOR:

"Quiet, please!" The lights dim, and then go out. A big crystal ball glows eerily. Gray, the great medium, is holding another seance. "What," I intone nasally, "are the spirits saying these days?" A ghostly whisper answers, "We are discussing the past of *PLANET STORIES*." Well, sir, a lot of information comes to light at that seance. I discover, for instance, that the best story published to date is "Vassals of the Master World," with "Black Friar of the Flame" holding down the second place honors. The best cover was on the Spring, 1942, Issue. Ah-h! That wonderful monster! Second place goes to the March, 1943, cover. The girl actually looks human. And she is proportioned right. Much as I like Leydenfrost, I must admit he makes his women too flat-chested and puts the breast-plates down around the waistline. (I hate to criticize anyone, even just a little bit. But wouldn't we feel silly if we went around telling white lies about how perfect everyone was?) The best year, so far, in *PLANET STORIES* history was 1942. The best inside pic, to date, is the Leydenfrost in the Winter, 1942, Issue. Talk about your B.E.M.'s! This monster is the one the expression was coined for. Best letter so far is Guy Gifford's in the Winter, 1941, Issue. Why did you quit writing letters to *Vizi-*

graph, Guy? Not that I agree with your opinions about Asimov. Isaac was getting to be one of my favorites before he stopped writing. (Or did he?) Best nifty: Bill Stoy's "Tol-Stoy" gag. Second best: Finn's "pynth-feathers."

Chalk up my vote against: reprints in any form; trimmed edges (results not worth the expense involved); too much editorial comment in the Vizigraph; personal duels between fans (in the Vizigraph); Milton Lesser's poetry. (Okay, less comment. Ed.)

Put me down for: Peacock's stories under Peacock's name; a good, long Vizigraph; a little better binding (the March, 1943, Issue came to pieces on me); more of Gifford's excellent cartoons; plenty of gals on the covers; a monthly Planet.

After the Grafus swallowed the poet on Gannymede, he (the poet) wandered off and fell in love with a mermaid, or fish-girl. He even followed her home. This brought up certain difficulties, as her home was at the bottom of the ocean. So, naturally, the food there was always uncooked. In fact, it was raw. But our poet was a science-fiction fan, and everyone knows that a SF fan will swallow anything. Well, he finally decided to ask for her hand. He approached the girl's mother, who was weighing herself on the bathroom scales. (All the fish-people have scales, you know.) The mother stated sadly that the girl did not have a hand, only flippers. This was a sad blow to the poor poet. (How did this get in? Ed.)

I promised not to criticize poor Cummings again. But after reading "The Flame Breathers" in the March, 1943, Issue—well, I just can't help saying that I winced every time I came to the word "little," or "blob," or "weird," or "thing," or "ghastly," and, yes, my old friend "off there." I counted the "little's" and there are at least sixty of them in the story. I may have missed a few. Cummings is always agog. I quote: "Ghastly, familiar sound! . . . they came bounding in—blobs of leaping red-green flame! A dozen or more of the weird creatures. . . ." Unquote.

Have just finished reading the May, 1943, issue of PLANET, and I am, on the whole, pleased with it. These colorful, three-dimensional covers that Rozen turns out are swell stuff. In my opinion you've got the best covers in science-fiction now. Don't let Rozen escape you. I rate the stories exactly as they appear in the table-of-contents, except for Bok's effort which comes last. DePina and Hasse make an effective team and their story gave me a lot of enjoyment, but the artist gave away their surprise punch about Aladdin being a girl. Rocklynne did all right for himself with his Raffles of the future. I like that sort of thing much better than his unpleasant Hallmyer series. Brackett gets better every story she writes. I'm always amazed that a woman can write with such power. Gifford is terrific. I like the illustration for the contents page.

To those acid-penned critics who pick each issue to extremely small pieces, I dedicate this last paragraph. The March issue of Writer's Digest says that there is a frightful shortage of writers. The armed forces and the OWI are taking the authors out of circulation. By 1944 eight out of twelve of the best producers will be gone. And remember that it's practically impossible to get science-fiction mags in England now.

Sincerely,

JAMES RUSSELL GRAY.

ALL RIGHT THEN—GRIPE!

3956 Ledgewood,
Cincinnati, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

Before plunging into the myriad complexities of another report to La Vizi, I feel called upon to defend myself. I am going to ask you to haul out a copy of this issue of Deah Ole PLANET STORIES (May) and read my letter on page 121. After resting for a moment to get over the horror of the thing, read your comment. Especially the first paragraph. There's where I feel called upon to defend myself to a certain extent. You see, Wilbur, it ain't so! I rated the eight yarns in the March number, giving them the following ratings: 9.9, 9.7, 9.6, 9.4, 9.1, 8.9, 7.2, and 5. All except two, then, were in my opinion, exceptional. Of the other two I simply did not care for one, and the other was really poor. At this point I'll mention that, on my famous 1 to 10 system, 10 plus is a classic, 10 is excellent, and 9 very good. And you, sir, accuse me—poor, innocent little me—of griping. *Gripping!* All I have to say is that if I'm ever an editor, I hope all the letters to me gripe like the very devil!

Let's start with the cover, shall we? Despite the sickening, eternal theme, it is good—very good, as a matter of fact. I like the colors a great deal. This would have been a really super cover if the gal on the rope had been a man. (Are the girls ever gonna hate me!) By all means, let's have more of Rozen. Though let's have Paul and Finlay, too. (Hah—optimistic, aren't I?)

Now for the stories.

First place goes to Mr. de Pina and Mr. Hasse, for "Alcatraz of the Starways." I *knew* that a really good yarn could be worked out on this theme, and, at last, someone has. Very well done. And notice, kiddies—it has scope. Title, however, was poor. How about "Swamp of Paradim" for the yarn? Too late now, tho. Via the incredible 1 to 10 system, the tale snares 9.9.

Next comes Miss Brackett, with "The Blue Behemoth." This one was really eerie in spots. Sorta wish the circus angle could have been done away with, though—or at least made into a minor role. Perhaps the characters could have been on Venus when the circus arrived, and then the cansin could have gotten loose. Would have been more convincing. But 'twas definitely excellent. More of Brackett, please! 9.7.

Third place to Mr. Bok, our erstwhile artist, for "Stranger from Space." Very neat though. (My do I overuse that word "though," though!) Hannes has done better . . . "The Sorcerer's Ship," "Dusk on the Moon," etc. By the way, he has returned to illustrating now. That a broad enuf hint?—9.3.

Next, "Menace of the Mists," by Richard Storey. A fine, actionful bit of scientific blood 'n' thunder. And there was no heroine! Swell! —9.

Fifth comes "The Meteor Makers," by Peter Hamilton, a gent with rather weird conceptions of a rocket ship in space and how it turns, twists, spins on a dime, etc. The plot was very good—good enough to make up for the weak handling thereof. Wish Binder had written this. But Hamilton deserves another chance.—8.5.

Pulling up in sixth place is Mr. Ross Rocklynne, who gives us "The Sandhound." *Mister* Rocklynne! A detective story! I thought you

knew better than to try that! Chee, chust like Fatman, Tallman, Stupidman, and all the rest. But good—of its type.—8.

Last, "Grifter's Asteroid," by H. L. Gold, not because it was poor, but because it was not serious science fiction. Nor was it humor. And I have seen what this type of story can do to a mag—two of them, in fact.—7.

The artwork picked up admirably this time. Good. The Leydenfrost boys are a real find—they do almost as well as their Dad. Anyhow, first place goes to Bob Leydenfrost, second to Harry, and third to Paul, whose work, though brilliant as usual, seemed hurried. The other pix aren't bad, and the one for the lead novel is actually good—except that the chap on the right appears to be singing "Swanee River" in the bath tub.

I have a suggestion that I really think is good. (Modest lad that I am.) Seriously, all fans want really great fiction. Most classics are long stories. You have shown a strong reluctance to print a book-length novel in PS, so I suggest serials. Further, I suggest thirty pages of each issue be devoted to a serial. The serial should be a three-parter. That would give us two ninety-page novels per year. What do you think, Editor? Let's put it up to the fans. Will you go that far—if the majority want such a policy, will you put it in? If the majority do not, I shall say no more on the subject. Fair enough? (Sorry, but too much time elapses between issues.—Ed.)

And I'll nominate the first author of these proposed serials: Ray Cummings, the lad who has been insulted, panned and jeered at by every crackpot in fandom. And the lad who wrote "Tarranno, the Conqueror," "Brigands of the Moon," "A Brand New World," "The Shadow Girl," "Wand, the Invader," and a hundred others. He could write another "Wand, the Invader." I know he could.

Rocklynne's squib about himself was interesting, and Gifford came through with a really hilarious cartoon. Hawww! As for La Vizi . . . that takes time.

First place is easy. It goes to Alan Mannion, for a swell letter. I wish I could write one ¼ as good. Ah well. Second place to Larry Shaw, De Hoimit. Third place goes to Dick Hetschel, who brings up a point I'd better answer. Yes, Dick, I do rate stories too highly. I know I do, but if you enjoyed science fiction the way I do don't think you'd go around muttering, "The tale is swell, but if I rate it high everyone will think I'm just a child; I'll put it at 7.5—that's always safe" either. "Nuff said."

I second the plea for Hidley's early return.

I don't care if you cut my letters—they're no good anyhow—but please leave the part about serials intact. I'm all enthused over the idea.

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER,
The Looney Lad of Ledgewood.

ADMIT IT, OLIVER!

Green Springs, Ohio.

DEAR EDITOR:

That the cover don't match any story doesn't seem to bother ole PS. It shall, therefore, spread no gray hairs on this correspondent's young scalp. Oliver must admit that it at least isn't a HORRIFIED damsel. My opinion? Preece Wheeew!

Now—to the stories.

'Menace of the Mists' and 'Stranger From Space' tie for first position. I just couldn't seem to separate these two swell shorts. GOOD—GOOD—More.

'Sandhound' with as neat a complete description of a planet as has graced pulp-pages in some time. Some of the scienti-detectif-yarns are pure detec. with Mars, or Mercury, or Venus thrown in so someone will read it. Much more of the SANDHOUND, 'Wilbur,' make him a character.

'Grifters Asteroid' is fourth.—Cute.

Brackett's 'Behemoth' is five. Circus yarn. Read several, never found one to get up and tear down walls over. HOWEVER—the more of Brackett's work I see, the better I think she's getting. Even remember the first story of hers I ever saw. 'Twas 'Out of the Sea' in Astish.

I imagine Brackett reads le Viz, and she must feel pretty good over the attention she evokes. Look at the comments on her—every one good. Whether she could take the sour with the sweet like CUMMINGS (Answer to all small letters) does is something else.

I will not mention last place, as many will rank it first. But I WILL say that the girl on page three looks, as Chad sez, 'as feminine as J. Louis.'

GOSH!—WHY does everyone drool over the RINGERS? How many brother-in-laws does he have. Guess I'm pretty dumb but I can't see it. Give me Gluckson!

Here we go with Sanford again. If the fellow were only a caustic moron (which he most certainly ISN'T) he would still have been very useful to the old VIZIGRAPH. He has brought forth much good, and not a little humorous wordage. This, I fear, large tho it is, is smaller than it well might have been because our editor unrelentingly clamped down on the two participants. (Rigor M. 'insulted' about THREE lugs if I remember correctly, but Milt was the only one to take up the torch and hatchet.) If they had gone on, it might have been that people would have laid out ye 20¢ just to hear the boys snarl. Then too, some narrow minds might have shunned such 'sophmoric drivelings.' Never fear for that—I'm a frosh. The thing is . . . they SHOULD have been let alone! So there, too! (So Sanford hasn't written again.—Ed.)

Peacock, you're an old GOSSIP! INVITING pure, sweet hermits to sully their soles (wearing down coupon 17) by passing on choice bits of information on so-called rats. ASIDE: "C'mon Shaw—GIVE!"

Definitely . . . HAVE a discussion page—tho that's a poor name for it as it's ALSO a letter column in another mag.

HETSHEL is right about that point system of Chad's—he should lower his sights.

ODD THOUGHT: Watch me stay a fan. An author leads a dog's life. Someone ALWAYS thinks he stinks. (Loud agreement from the Author's stands—or kennels.)

Boy, do you infuriate me! So CUMMINGS is operating under a pen-name, eh? Sure wish I knew what! I'll try and find out! (Who said we said Cummings?—Ed.)

HEY, boys and girls . . . was that old FAITHFUL going by, or was our editor steaming? In a timid voice dares answer; "Seems to be Hon. Ed. Peacock—is burning fiercely." I hope we all do quit riding the poor editor.

That takes care of the letter column but for the ratings. Chad Oliver, who always obliges

ANY TIME with a swell letter, gets the post spot. Mannion for second, for the fine ideas he imparts. I sure hope he doesn't stop writing after this one. Hunter for three mostly for his cute, but impossible title. Winds it up, does it not?

Because this is a good place to put it, I will volunteer this beauty:

JAPANESE DESCRIPTION OF ONE OF THEIR SHIPS BEING SUNK.

"Near Guadalcanal, our largest dreadnaught, the SOOKIEDROOPA met, and COMPLETELY destroyed four American torpedos. After this glorious victory the ship was abandoned for tactical reasons. Our sailors withdrew in perfect order to previously prepared positions. When they arrived there they won a complete victory over the hard bunks of said American prison ship."

Sincerely,
JAY CHIDSEY,
Genius Extraordinary.

OUR FIENDISH FREAK!

104 W. Charlton St.
Savannah, Georgia.

DEAR EDITOR:

While standing in a newsstand the other day I noticed a magazine high on a shelf far out of my reach. I was about to leave when I caught the name "PLANET STORIES." Then I went stark raving mad. How could I get it? Then suddenly I got an idea! I grabbed a little girl (no sacrifice is too great for P. S.) and stood on her. (Ain't I fiendish?) I just could reach it. While I was at it I got two, a Winter issue and a March. After plunking down my half dollar and straining at my bonds for the change, I shot home on a motorcycle a cop had just left (see, I'm desperate), and locked myself in my room and started reading madly.

Before handing out any bouquets, I want to ask how you ever picked out such a story as "Oridin's Formula"? I had to put a clothespin on my nose while reading it. Wasn't it just too ducky that Caddo had a neutralizer on, though? You surely must have been desperate to print that story.

On the whole, P. S. is pretty good. "Colossus of Chaos" was the best in the Winter issue. "Planet of No-Return" was right good. (Say, just between you and me, if it's a Planet of No-Return, how did they manage to come back?) (Sorry, but a secret.—Ed.) "Outpost on 10" was all right but there wasn't anything to it. "Galactic Ghost" slipped by with very little to spare. That's about all I've read in the Winter issue so far, (pardon me while I brush off the rats—they're after this corn). And now for the March issue—all I've read in that so far is Formula (aaghhhh) and I've already discussed that. Right now I'm reading "Citadel of Lost Ships." Will let you know about that later.

Say, if you want a short, short, short story, I've one I dashed off the other day called "Comet of Doom." And say, listen to this: "Out of interstellar space it came and caused a clumsy young man to become a hero." (No, wait! ! ! . . . Don't say it! ! I know! But you can't say I didn't try). Let me know if you'd like to use it. (Course I ain't got any hopes.)

I've been reading the ravings of the maniacs in the Viz and that explains this rare manuscript. (Ain't I cute?)

That's all for this time, so with best wishes for P. S., I am

Sincerely,

WALTER KESSEL,
"The Flying Freak."

USELESS CHATTER?

1033rd T.S.S.
Headquarters Flight
A.A.F.T.T.C.
B.T.C. #5
Kearns, Utah
Bks. No. 2515

DEAR EDITOR:

I was recently fortunate indeed in reading a late copy of PLANET STORIES, the first in some time. I have always held your publication in high regard, and was not disappointed in the issue I obtained, through the courtesy of Miss Leigh Brackett, whose work I am an ardent admirer of. The issue I refer to is the March '43 one.

The general opinion is that LEYDENFROST is a superb artist, to which I highly agree. He did a masterful illustration for the background to our own Air Force 9th Service Command Victory Creed. It depicts in sky blue, a fighting airplane over a battleship. I have held high regards ever since his first entrance into S-F illustrating for his work.

As for Larry Shaw. Yes, I know the chap. He is quite old in S-F, and ever since he's been in the field of sfandom he has written literally reams of letters to every Pro S-F mag issued in the USA, I venture to say. However, in general he is really a nice chap and has never harmed a soul in his life, which means I brand Mr. Harvey Marcy's yarn of his escapade with him as meaningless or something of the sort.

So it is TRUE, Cummings was left out of one of your issues. I have come to regard him as a second trademark of your magazine, FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE being the other. However, one must admit he has a knack and talent for the short story and fits in nicely for your publication as a "filler" for lack of material, as he can always rake up a story in short order that will fill the bill, which is why you must use him so.

There is really too much "drivel" and childish talk going on in your Vizigraph section for us, the true "pure blooded" fans to really appreciate or get any info or interest from them. Useless chatter.

Sincerely,
PVT. J. M. CUNNINGHAM.

This is too much. I'm not certain but what all of this praise is not good for us. Look, much as we hate to admit it, we've become used to the nasty cracks that float around our desk. Okay, so the mag is good.

But don't knock the Vizigraph! That's our pet, and we like the 'useless chatter' that flows through the letters. We like the guys and gals who write, and we like to read what they write. In fact, we're getting so we work up a slow burn whenever somebody kicks the Vizifan gang.

Doggonit, don't be so pure-bred; come on in with the rest of us—we have fun and bloody noses.

Cordially,
THE EDITOR.

FULLILLMENT!

820 James Street,
Syracuse, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

The first issue of PLANET as a bi-monthly fulfills all you announced in your previous issue. The following stories, in the order mentioned, were as good as anything you have given us in a long time:

- (1) Slaves of the 9th Moon by Rocklynn.
- (2) Star of Panadur by A. de Pina and Hasse.
- (3) Sword of Johnny Damokles by Parker.
- (4) Trouble on Tycho by Bond.
- (5) Citadel of Lost Ships by Brackett.
- (6) Cosmic Castaway by Jacobi.
- (7) The Flame Breathers by Cummings.
- (8) Oridin's Formula by Winterbotham.

It was a surprise to read this short-short story by Haase and de Pina as the latter seems to be a newcomer to "PLANET." And yet they managed to capture second place because of their marvelous handling of the plot. I wish they would write a sequel to this short-short, especially a long one. Hasse is one of my favorites, but I have never read such smooth suspenseful writing by him before. Either he is improving nightly or else this newcomer has a lot on the ball.

I feel that you are doing wonders for "PLANET" and by all means we want to read your stories under your own name.

Sincerely,

WESLEY R. BRIGGS.

LEAPING PLANET!

DEAR EDITOR:

1536 B. Street, N. W.,
Washington, D. C.

I congratulate you on two counts, Brackett's Citadel of Lost Ships and Star of Panadur. Both have a freshness and originality one seldom finds in the usual SF story.

While Citadel of Lost Ships is by far the bigger and more important work, Star of Panadur seems to have been written by some one who really knows fine writing. The descriptions of the Panadurs and the "cave" are unique.

I have never read anything by Mr. De Pina before, but if he can write like that in collaboration, with Mr. Hasse, I hope that you will keep this fine team and give us more of their stories.

PLANET is improving by leaps and bounds—you're doing fine work.

Even the covers are improving a great deal. How about longer novels instead of so many novelettes?

Sincerely,

MRS. ANNA MARIE FORTUNY.

SPEAK UP, LADIES!

Here we go again. Tough to get stories of any kind, much as we want them. But we're trying every day.

And glad you wrote, but sorry letter was so short. We like the ladies (bless them) and wish they realized that this is their department, too.

Come on, girls—give.

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

GOOD EXAMPLE!

2936 Ulric St.,
San Diego, Calif.

DEAR CORDIAL EDITOR:

And why shouldn't you be? We put up with a lot of disappointments and still tolerate you, don't we? For a good example, March Issue: no Leydenfrost—no Finley—no really super-plots; some punk illustrations; and too much of Cummings and Winterbotham; even some of Bond's not-good-enough-to-be-bonded! Strictly bathtub stuff, I find, with several of some one else's old rings around it! (i.e., music kills the nasty brutes; dead, too!

Best story in the ish was, shame, you he-writers, Leigh Brackett's "Citadel of Lost Ships." Her writing did it, not her plot. Whatta plusher-penner she is! Next comes Rocklynn with his "Slaves of the Ninth Moon," which I would have appreciated even more if the Bureau of Transmitted Egos hadn't made it too much like his "Task to L—." Third: Parker's "Sword of Johnny Damokles," and for a short, though hash-of-hash, "Star of Panadur" wasn't too bad. The rest—mediocrity plus . . .

Even the Viz, my vice, seemed slow, compared to that high-juice-circuit it was generating on for awhile, what with Asimov, "Contagious 'Yeah'" Conway, (Shaw—add an "I" and call him Shroud—that'd even him up with the Macabre One, whilst we're on nicknames.) You see, I have been ringsiding, and it has been fun, even from there! But now, up for the swing myself, I dunno, maybe I should'a stayed outa the square? ? ?

And while still in the Viz: Gergen can KEEP his Gripe! Cutting the writers down on possible prizes would be like vegetabbling the weeds. Some V-garden you'd have left, I fear, so, pardon puns, don't be an amateur farmer, huh? My #1 vote on letters to Bob Fontinelle for a bit of real, honest-to-goodness POETRY! Don't boo me, pals, I know his letter was a bit stiff, but that verse was right out of this world. Agreed, or am I just a single kindred, understanding soul? #2 vote also to poetry; Oliver, the Looney Lad, not because it was soooo beootiful, but only too true. MISTER Bond! Haste does make waste! #3 vote: It was almost too thick to wade through, Wade, but you're working in the general drift of a good sense of humor. Thin it down with a little more vitriol, and break the big I habit, and you got sumpin there. As for Milt Lesser, tell him I enjoyed him much the lesser since he "reformed," or did his auto-biog. in P. S. ruin his hat size?

So-long to the Port of Unarrived Authors for now. . . .

Sincerely,

M. J. NUTTALL.

BAD EXAMPLE!

We're not absolutely certain as to which side does the most of the tolerating—but we're working on it.

And we think you're right about some of the laughs going from the letters—golly, when we said to take it easy, we meant only to cut out some of the super-needling that was going on. Just stay within the bounds of good taste—and let her rip!

Cordially,

THE EDITOR.

SHORT-CIRCUITED COLOSSUS!

WE'RE WRONG—AGAIN!

R. F. D. 4,
Celina, Ohio.

Del Monte Hotel,
221 W. 3rd Street,
Los Angeles, Calif.

DEAR EDITOR:

Most generally I read only such books as "The Count of Monte Cristo" and "Ben Hur" and them only for book reports. I never read WESTERNS. PLANET STORIES are the only science fiction I read, partly because of my financial status, and partly because of the quality of the reading and advertising. The first time I picked up PLANET—three consecutive issues ago—I looked at the illustrations and then at the advertising, then I paid the clerk. The inside front cover contains an ad about a detective story magazine, the inside back cover displayed brawny Atlas, and the back advertised a radio school. That was all, nothing to be ashamed of. I could carry the book home without undue criticism from the folks.

I agree with you that the winter issue of PLANET is better than ever, that is, than any I've read. If the World Dictator (To Be) still knows of four better science fiction magazines let him name one.

The stories? Oh yes.

Number 1. Doorway to Destruction. It was best despite its being so short. I was prepared to read another twelve pages of it.

No. 2. Outpost on Io.

No. 3. Peril of the Blue World. Where did they get the idea that the earth was blue?

No. 4. Colossus of Chaos. The idea of Colossus growing on electric current was well developed, according to the atomic theory matter is made up of electricity—see any chemistry book. I expected them to short circuit him. Why wasn't he destroyed when he was led to Grossman? He must have been led over lead.

No. 5. Planet of No Return.

No. 6. The Man from Siyuk. Did I ever tell you my theories on the Ice Age? No? It would make a good (?) story!

No. 7. Spoilers of the Spaceways.

No. 8. Meteor Men of Mars. I expected the ultimate action to come sooner.

No. 9. Galactic Ghost. Kubilus deserves this place for leaving Willard hanging in space so long.

Now I shall take up the subject of art. The cover could be improved 100% by removing the green mask from the lower left hand corner and replacing it with a pale white face. Leave the printing on, it attracts attention.

Best inside art is Graef on 71.

No. 2. Doolin on 55.

No. 3. Paul on 41 and 59.

No. 4. Leydenfrost on 99. At first glance I thought Zuggoth was bent on removing two large bones from Hammond's abdomen but I seem to be mistaken.

I don't like the way Paul caricatured his animals on page 2.

Fox is good but his men are too mechanical.

Nuts to Gifford—my stomach revolts—it's terrible—I can do better.

The Vizigraph is pretty fair since the authors of it forgot that yeah stuff.

I give John Gavin my vote for the best letter.

Also I don't have a typewriter or time to rewrite this, so take it or leave it.

Sincerely,

CHARLES W. SCHMIDT.

DEAR MR. EDITOR:

When I read Milt Lesser's letter in a preceding issue of your magazine PLANET STORIES, and above all, your reply, I felt that a really great change was due for PLANET. However, I feel that this is not the case. All of us Fans rejoice that you finally decided to go bi-monthly, but we are still waiting for you to change your opinion as to the mental age of us fans. You seem to feel that stories of BLOOD AND THUNDER masquerading under a thin veil of Alien surroundings is all that we can absorb. But you're wrong. You will never know how wrong until you give us really BIG stuff, with wide scope and fresh, imaginative ideas, instead of the hackneyed hash we have been forced to read. When you give us really first class stories such as you have given us in the past—and keep it up consistently, the circulation figures will merely confirm what the overwhelming letter response will tell you.

In your present issue you have two fine short stories which at least encourage us to hope that you are TRYING to give us better stories. They are,

THE SWORD OF JOHNNY DAMOKLES,

BY Hugh F. Parker. And,

THE STAR OF PANADUR, BY Albert De Pina and Henry Hasse.

Either of the two surpasses any of your well-padded novelettes especially Cummings' FLAME BREATHERS and Leigh Brackett's utterly unimaginative, ultra-padded Hack of a story, CITADEL OF LOST SHIPS. Shades of the Sargasso Seal! Every single bit of action is brought in by the short hairs to fill in adventure and make the story MOVE, but so transparently done, that we never feel that there is any logical need of such welter of GORE, or, for that matter, we never feel any sympathy for the Kraylens, whose pitifully few numbers and decadent state invite LIQUIDATION. As for the final sacrificial offering of the hero, Phociel! I am not a critic, but when an author cannot make up her mind to either write Adventure, Tragi-comedy, or HACK, I'm through! Well, if Brackett is going to descend to such depths of hackdom, and spoil her fine record of stories, and if you are going to accept such trash merely to feature her name, how in the name of all the Green Gods of Venus are YOU going to keep your promises to really better PLANET STORIES?

If this letter were not long enough already, I would go through the stories one by one and give you the collective reaction of our circle of fan readers here in the city of the Queen of the Angels. But I shall keep one sugar-coated pill to the end. You have really given us a fine, imaginative and beautifully written story in STAR OF PANADUR. I have read Hasse in nearly all the Sf Mags, but never has he written with such surety, such magnificent description . . . or is it De Pina's hand? Whichever of the two did it, or BOTH, you have a marvelous team in these two, worth more than all the rest put together if this story is an indication. However, I would pay twice the price of PLANET to see them write a Novelette together THAT WOULD BE THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING. Or is that too much to ask?

Sincerely,

GONZALO ELOSEGUI.

DePINA IS AT BAT!

Staff Sergeant
858 Guard Squadron,
Bolling Field, D. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

For countless issues of PLANET I have been nose-deep in the VIZIGRAPH, enjoying with a deplorable sense of malice the feuds and battle-royals, the kicks and the orchids, not to mention the intense rivalry between the writers. But alas! My sense of fairness has forced me to write and thus join the melee, making myself a fair target for having forsaken my *Ivory Tower*.

First I must confess that since I last saw you right after New Year's, I underwent the Great Adventure, and learned that although Cleopatra may have been all she was cracked up to be, since she became *drifting dust*, the "Houris of the Desert" have lost all their glamour, and as for the Sheiks . . . *Sacre nom d'un nom!* And believe me, the desert in . . . (censored,) is colder than Mars' *Mare Arenum*, but with this difference, that the rains mildew everything but your hair, and even that finally curls up in disgust! As for the *Air*, the great empty spaces of the stratosphere, with a carpet of clouds at your feet and the frosty brilliance of the stars above . . . there's no feeling of loneliness in the world like that of being in what amounts to an all-glass compartment which gives the feeling of being suspended in space! I could tell you a few things about acceleration . . . your jaw slowly but inexorably twists to one side, and muscles . . . but enough of that, or the F.B.I. will be after me.

Taking the Vizigraph first, LARRY SHAW'S letter takes first place, first because of his fine critical appraisal of the stories in last issue (your first bi-monthly,) and second because of his admirable restraint faced with a delicate problem. I like his style, and the breezy flow of praise and criticism. I'd like to give CHAD OLIVER second place, even if his idea of my collaboration with my friend HASSE leaves a lot to be desired. And, tying for second place with him, the perennial Falcon—GENE HUNTER. Give Mrs. GAVIGAN third place for her sincerity and because . . . oh well, *cherchez la femme!*

And now for the stories. Leaving aside the lead novel, ALCATRAZ OF THE STARWAYS (*Orchids to you for that title*), on which with becoming modesty I refrain from commenting, First place with top honors goes to ROSS ROCKLYNNE for THE SAND-HOUND, a neat murder yarn convincingly written. While I felt that ROSS failed to realize its possibilities to the full, there is a vast charm in his style of writing that makes up for whatever trivial shortcomings his plot may have. More of ROCKLYNNE, please!

Once again I was disappointed in LEIGH BRACKETT. I have read her Circus stories in other magazines, and they suffer from a sameness that gives them the flavor of stale beer. On the other hand, to this day I remember one of the most beautiful stories she has ever written about the Martian Desert, published in another magazine, and so beautifully told, that it took top honors from the lead novel from one of today's greatest STF writers. I hope LEIGH will give us one of her truly *terthought* stories instead of such *hurried* yarns as the above and CITADEL OF LOST SHIPS, which although with an exciting beginning soon lapsed into an amazing far-

rago of her best and worst. However, lack of genuine competition gives it second place.

Believe it or not, STRANGER FROM SPACE by HANNES BOK wins third place with a delightful mixture of fantasy and Stf. BOK has a nostalgic quality to his writing and a style so highly individualistic, that he bids fair to become one of our very best Fantasy and Science-fiction writers. At first I thought that when he entered the field of writing it was a great loss to the world of illustrators. But time has proved me wrong—in fact, he writes better than he draws!

Fourth was METEOR MAKERS, by HAMILTON, which was spoiled by the type of writing usually characterized as "*blood and thunder*." With an excellent plot, interesting characters and a "set-up" that would have earned him second place, his handling of the story robbed him of second honors. Mind you, I do not object to fast action and pure adventure, but there are many ways of using dialogue, dramatic action and description, and when these three are merely piled on for the sake of "ACTION" the story is robbed of *credibility*. Hamilton *can* write and I hope that this critical appraisal will be taken in as good spirit as it is given. The rest of the stories *also ran*.

I very seldom have liked the cover paintings of ANY magazine. But I must confess that the cover illustration of this issue by ROZEN is delightful. There is a quality of *aliveness* to the figures, and an excellence of draughtsmanship, that amazed me, specially since I expected something amateurish, to be truthful. I consider it one of the very best covers you've had. Please give Mr. ROZEN my thanks. The fact that *Aladdian* has no wings is a minor matter. While we are on the subject of the lead Novel. Your title for it is an inspiration. The original title meant nothing to the reader—that is, until he finished reading the story. YOURS tells the story from the very first. And so I will not end in a Pollyanna note, I must say that the inside illustration for the lead Novel is perfectly awful. The only two illustrations worthy of note being LEYDENFROST'S pic for THE SAND-HOUND and second his other one for the BLUE BEHEMOTH, and this last one left much to be desired, at that.

In conclusion, if you find a lot of misspelled words, typographical errors, etc., blame it on the fact that I'm still in bed, convalescing and it's hard to typewrite with the darned thing on your lap. My "scratches" are healing nicely and I'll be out in another couple of weeks, when I expect to surprise you with another yarn, believe it or not. With best wishes and congratulations on the consistent improvement of PLANET, I remain,

Sincerely,

ALBERT DE PINA.

MARLOW MUSCLES IN AGAIN!

5809 Beechwood Ave.,
Indianapolis, Ind.

What say we tear into the May issue of PLANET now? First off, it would seem that a revolution is due in the Vizigraph—and I think, perhaps, that it is even overdue. These friendly, man to man—or should I say fan to fan?—type of letters are okay. I'm all for 'em. Occasional stuff of the type that Messrs. Asimov and Pongley dish out—and even yours truly in the last ish, if I may be permitted to class myself with these 'greats'—is also okay. Maybe one or two an ish to balance things up. BUT—I believe that Lesser, Conway,

Hunter, *et al.*, are going just a bit too far. I realize how easy it is to let yourself slip into writing such stuff, having done it myself. I think that after it is sealed up in an envelope and sent in to the ed the writer feels rather silly. I know I do. And—and this will be the last of my opinions on the subject—I think that your feelings on regarding such missives, Mr. Peacock, go farther than tolerant amusement. So what say, Happy Genius, and Mr. Space Falcon, that we send in some sensible, concrete comments and suggestions that will help to make *PLANET STORIES* the better, bigger—after they bury Hitler—magazine that we all want it to be. Now don't get me wrong; I don't want to do away with the friendly, companionable air that made the Vizigraph the top letter column that it is. I feel that science fiction is, and should be regarded as, something far better than the ravings of madmen written for morons to drool over. And your letters don't help. Pardon, *our* letters.

Incidentally, I have recently come to the conclusion that most fans are sensible, serious-minded guys under their somewhat wild exterior. In fact, I think they are probably *too* serious, which would account for the crazy letters they write and the way they go wild at conventions. Sort of a safety valve for all their pent-up emotions. So the few who are always dead serious in their fanning—if I may swipe a phrase from Raym Washington—I *think*—managed to mislead me. I thought the rest of 'em were just hanging around for the heluvit—or should it be two l's? I'm undecided since reading Davis's letter in the March *Digest*. But, like the letters in *PLANET*, the funny business seems to have run away with them. I don't think fandom has accomplished all it might have in the past few years (Listen to 'em howl on that one!).

I liked Alan Mannion's letter. Let's give him first this time. Agree with his "vastness" where *PLANET*'s type of yarn is concerned, though I didn't agree with all of his selections. As the outstanding example of a "vast" story I'd pick Bond's "The Ultimate Salient." Trouble is, so many yarns which might possess this all-too-rare quality usually turn into pure junk after the first few paragraphs. Binder's "Vassals of the Master World," for instance. He built up to a terrific climax and *boom!* The good guys lose. Then we start out from rock bottom again and build up to another terrific climax. Trouble was that the first climax was too utterly climactical. By all rights, the story should have ended right there, but we had about ten or fifteen thousand words of anti-climax. It read like and, really, *was* two stories stuck together. Some readers compared it to Smith's work, for which he should sue them. Smith builds his stories up with a series of minor but increasingly greater climaxes, and any setbacks are usually just great enough to maintain the readers' interest. But by all means let's see some more of Binder. He can do good stuff.

Just realized that I made a rather inconsistent statement. *VotMW* didn't degenerate after the first few paragraphs. If you had whacked it off just before the first climax and then stuck on the last one it would have been okay.

Second place I sadly allocate to our one and only Hermit. Sadly because I would like to give it first. Too much competition, Larry. Better luck next time. I'm in favor of the discussions. How about announcing in the preceding issue what the topic will be and giving everyone who wants to the chance to send in an argument either pro or con? You can then select the two you

think are best. And be sure to keep 'em down to one column. Keeps it from becoming boring and makes the contestants think a little harder in cutting their arguments down to the major factors. Then the Vizifanners can vote for the best argument and for prizes we can have, say, the original cover paintings from *PLANET*. No? Oh well, I can try. As usual, I must disagree with Larry about a story. I think Brackett's yarn was the best in the issue. Granted that the plot wasn't so good; the writing was still superb. I am inclined to agree with your statement concerning Miss Brackett's future.

Outstanding this issue were the cover, cartoon, Brackett tale, Paul's and the Leydenfrosts' pics. Bok's story was far below his usual level of work, in my opinion.

Well, I haven't gone the limit, but I think I'll stop now, anyway.

Sincerely,
LEONARD MARLOW.

A BORING TERMITE?

Coleraine, Minn.

DEAR EDITOR:

Here goes for my first crack at cracking "The Vizigraph."

While voraciously prowling for reading material in a corner drug store recently a gaudy something in the mag rack caught my eye. (Hint here:—tell Rozen to stop putting nightmares into print, and for Pete's sake, draw a cover appropriate to some story.) Well, anyhow, it turned out to be "PLANET STORIES." The stories were read with the foolowing—and foolowing is not a misprint, as it was exceedingly hard to make any discriminations between the stories. Anyway, I list them as follows: (eh! eh!)

"Citadel of Lost Ships"—9.2. Well done, L. Brackett—nifty plot.

"Slaves of the Ninth Moon"—8.8. Also a change, although it was a little "hazy" in spots.

"Sword of Johnny Damokles"—8.5. Perhaps in this and my fourth choice I am a little prejudiced, as I like a little, in fact, quite a little humor, or irony in my stories.

"Oridin's Formula"—8.4. Really very simple and perhaps was not as good as the fifth choice. Winterbottom should have made this pot into a novelette at least.

"Cosmic Castaway"—8.2. Weak in spots, otherwise good.

"Trouble on Tycho"—7.6. Humorous, and well written, but a little too slapsticky—if you get what I mean!

"Star of Panadur"—7.1. I had expected better of dePina and Hasse.

"The Flame Breathers"—6.8. Cummings—huh!

Well, to the ask-it-dept. First, please, oh please, Mr. Questionably Almighty Editor, how about giving up a few novelettes in favor of a long novel, at least 30 pages long?

And now, an appeal I shall continue to make (two appeals, rather) until my wishes have been granted. Foist, a cover by Leydenfrost, and second, a novel by Rocklyne. Pliz, Pliz, grant me these two extremely small boons. If you do not do this, I shall wreak upon you "The Curse of Cummings," which is the worst form of punishment yet devised by man—i.e.,—I will send you a Cummings story every week, which the spirit of "Foo" will compel you to read. Now isn't that horrible?

Sincerely,
BARRY "TERMITE" ROWLES.

(Continued from other side)

any one of his victims up—as they'll be cutting me in the next half hour—and you'll find nothing. And by the way, Mr. Colt—*YOU are on his list!*"

Thus spoke Jeremy Taylor, in the death house, to Inspector Thatcher Colt, the man who sent him there.

Immediately after Taylor's execution, the hunt started for the mystery killer. Months went by. Then one day the warden burst into Colt's office, panting that he had found a clew—and then slumped dead at Colt's feet!

Like a pistol shot, two men hopped a cab to the address the warden had given. And shortly, in strutted an oily-looking charlatan in elegant white gloves—a treacherous note of sympathy in his voice—announcing that one of the detectives sent to fetch him had been strangely stricken in the cab on the way to Headquarters, and lay on a slab in Bellevue that very minute!

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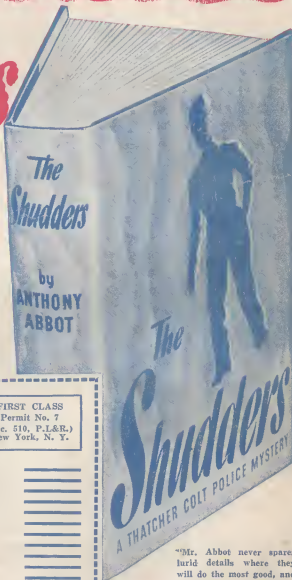
this fiend who killed for the sheer sport of killing?

"HE stole Marcella Kingsley from me—the only thing I have loved in this life. She is in another man's arms tonight—and I only minutes from the electric chair!

"I want Marcella punished, Mr. Colt. I want revenge. For this man is much more a criminal than I am. His crimes are murder. Murder for sport. Murder upon murder upon murder!

"My little murder was the bungled plot of an amateur. But this man has a way of murdering that is new. He scorns knife or gun or poison . . . and no fancy death rays, either. Just a little trick, as commonplace as it is deadly. And it leaves no trace. Cut

Continued on other side



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